

1996

Accident and Strange Calamity in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’

Rachel Crawford

University of San Francisco, crawfordr@usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/engl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Crawford, Rachel, "Accident and Strange Calamity in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’" (1996). *English*. Paper 1.
<http://repository.usfca.edu/engl/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in English by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

Accident and Strange Calamity in 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison'

'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' has been called the most unified of Coleridge's early poems. Critics have noted that the structure of the poem moves from self-pity through the sublime experience, to generosity; from an imprisoning bower and dell to a glorious, sun-washed hilltop; and from the poet's isolation through his identification with an ego ideal, to a sense of full community with nature. As Richard Haven points out, 'the situation which seems in [Coleridge's] earlier poems to be one of "either/or" requiring a choice, becomes in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" one in which opposites evolve into synthesis. Not only does the solitude of individuation yield to the sense of universal harmony, but the "return" is not to solitude but to a balance between the individual and the universal, the parts and the whole, so that a simultaneous awareness of both is possible'.¹ Like a sonata, the elements of the initial motif provide the rudiments of the theme and variation that compose the second part, and return revitalized yet identifiable in the third.

This unity conceals two narratives marked only obliquely in the poem. The first, described in the epigraph as the 'accident' which prevents the poet from walking with his friend, alludes to Coleridge's wife Sara, who, as is well known, was responsible for laming the poet by spilling scalding milk on his foot. The second, the 'strange calamity' referred to in line 32 which befell Coleridge's friend, Charles, draws Charles' sister, Mary Lamb, and her murder of their mother under the purview of the text.² In this essay, I examine the role these narratives play as the explanatory myths on which Coleridge builds the aesthetic unity of the poem. Far from offering a comfortable psychological space in an afterglow of sublime experience that most readings of 'This Lime-Tree Bower' suggest, these narratives qualify the proffered sublime solution and its idealized relation to human experience, providing an alternative view of the nature of sublimity in Coleridge's early poems.

The disconnection between the two unsettling narratives and Coleridge's poetic effusion on a masculine friendship invites us to examine the aesthetic

codes within which the effusion is couched, since, like Shelley's dying flame which is nourished by darkness, sublime radiance in this poem feeds upon disturbing shadows. Indeed, the material conditions underlying the poem are played out in Coleridge's deployment of aesthetic codes. This aesthetic coding will be my subject in the second part of this essay. First, I consider the background to Coleridge's poem in two incidents of domestic tragedy and violation.

Coleridge's reference in his epigraph to the 'accident which disabled him from walking' with his friends 'during the whole time of their stay' was less oblique in the poem's original version, a verse incorporated into a letter to Robert Southey in July 1797: Well they are gone; and here must I remain, Lam'd by the scathe of fire, lonely & faint, This lime-tree bower my prison.³ As Haven suggests, the final version, which excludes the self-pitying second line, renders us 'unaware of practical contingencies, of the difficulties of Coleridge with dear Sara and boiling milk. We are not concerned with what has happened, with the identity of "they" who have gone, nor with the reasons for the "imprisonment" (Haven, pp. 66–7). Haven accurately describes here the effect of Coleridge's revisions, which enable the reader to focus on a scene unmarred by accident and division and articulating a harmony driven by the imaginary relationship of the poet with his friend Charles.

The allusion to Mary Lamb's history, by contrast, is embedded in the text, and rather than indicating the poet's descent into self-pity, precedes his emergence from that isolating state into transcendental relationship. It marks the point at which Coleridge's references to his 'friends' are narrowed to Charles alone, who is addressed as the sole presence in the visionary landscape:

Yes! they wander on
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hunger'd after Nature, many a year,
In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity!

(ll. 26–32)

In these lines the poet seems to identify Charles' 'strange calamity' with the imprisoning confines of the city rather than with the historical circumstance, when Mary Lamb in the summer of 1796 wounded her father and murdered her mother.

While these tales are now familiar to most readers of the poem, they appear to have little relation to each other, let alone to the structure of the

text: the one a domestic accident, the other homicide; the one caused by the poet's wife, the other by a single woman highly admired by her intellectual peers, but subject to periods of psychosis. Sara's domestic accident and Mary's crime may at first seem to bear little relation to each other, yet in the realm of the psyche they do have much in common: they suggest that a violent history of the human subject may be inseparable from the aesthetic of the sublime experience which 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' explores.

Sara's accident is particularly rich with implications for this hypothesis. Associated with the maternal body, milk furnishes one of the unconscious mnemonic traces which Melanie Klein referred to as the 'part-objects' of infantile experience and which Jacques Lacan described as the 'objet-a': the somatic bedrock of images assimilated with language through which lack and want are transformed into desire.⁴ From a different but related viewpoint, anthropologist Mary Douglas posits margins, especially those of the body, as dangerous boundaries which shape the cultural frameworks for taboo. Julia Kristeva has significantly reformulated this condition as 'abjectal', a word connoting both ejection and humiliation, which she associates with the disturbance of self-identity or of the identity of a system or any human order through the transgression of boundaries.⁵ As Douglas (p. 121) observes, 'all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body'.

In this mythic scene, spilt milk is doubly transgressive, a fluid which crosses not merely somatic boundaries, but social boundaries also. So while Sara's accident may appear adventitious, Coleridge's allusion to it as the practical basis of the poem suggests that he shaped the poem in response to this domestic contingency. Neither his unwilling participation in this drama nor Sara's intentions are relevant to the mythos which he subsequently develops. 'Pollution can be committed intentionally', Douglas (p. 113) points out, 'but intention is irrelevant to its effect – it is more likely to happen inadvertently'. Given the mythological associations of a man's wounded foot with figures like Achilles, Oedipus, and Jesus, it is unlikely that Coleridge overlooked the significance of Sara's accident. But while we are familiar with the Freudian allegory which equates the wounded foot with the blinded Oedipus and thence by direct association with the castrated male subject, this simplification cuts the story short. The self-blinding of Oedipus-'Swellfoot' initiates the events that lead to his apotheosis in the Grove of the Furies, or the Eumenides, at Colonus.

Indeed, *Oedipus at Colonus* is a story about boundaries transgressed or dissolved, as suggested by the dual role of the Furies-Eumenides in Greek theatre who hounded Orestes to madness but also healed Oedipus of his sorrows. The king who fulfills the prophecy of the sphinx by walking on three 'legs' to Colonus is permitted to dissolve the boundaries between wounding and vision, between death and life, between madness and healing. The drama thus parallels the sacramental vision of the Christian faith, in which Jesus must be wounded on his heel before he can crush the head of the serpent and achieve a similarly sublime translation.

Coleridge grounds the sublime in such a transformative experience in *Religious Musings*, written only eighteen months before 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison'. There, as a pastoral Miltonic simile makes plain, transcendence is founded on the experience of the abyss:

As when a shepherd on a vernal morn
Through some thick fog creeps timorous with slow foot,
Darkling he fixes on the immediate road
His downward eye: all else of fairest kind
Hid or deformed. But Lo! the bursting Sun!
Touched by the enchantment of that sudden beam
Straight the black vapour melteth, and in globes
Of dewy glitter gems each plant and tree;
On every leaf, on every blade it hangs!
Dance glad the new-born intermingling rays,
And wide around the landscape streams with glory!

(ll. 94–104)

Here, the shepherd's 'downward eye' and 'darkling' vision is the necessary precursor to his intuition of the sublime landscape. Indeed, throughout *Religious Musings* the glorious day-spring of moral, political and aesthetic sublimity opens out of benighted experience. As the atmospheric disturbances 'thick fog' and 'black vapour' imply, the abjection of the shepherd is not caused merely by blindness, the loss of sight and light, but by a dissolution of clarifying forms and boundaries. It is precisely such a disturbance, transposed onto the domestic landscape, that links Sara's household accident to Mary's crime: each involves a disturbance of the boundaries which serve to clarify the domestic and social order.

Mary's horrifying murder of her mother has obscured the historical fact that she committed the crime only after being distracted from an attack on her father. Like the abject which, in Kristeva's words (p. 10) 'is a composite of judgment and affect, condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives', Mary's crime incorporates the paternal and the maternal into the archaic

history of the subject. The laming or wounding of the husband/father and the sacrifice of the mother are the foundational narratives on which this poem is built. As explanatory myths, they intimate an aspect of the sublime not usually associated with Coleridge.⁶ We are more readily drawn to his notion of the sublime as the spiritualized intellect's intuition of 'something *one & indivisible*' when '*all things counterfeit infinity!*' (CL, I, p. 349).

The final lines of the poem, in which the poet is concerned with 'Each faculty of sense' (l. 63) and alludes to himself as 'bereft of promis'd good' (l. 65), subtly remind us of the domestic scenes against which this poem is depicted and link the sublime experience of nature to the invisible presences of Mary and Sara. Their narratives plumb the abyss of human consciousness, establishing the domestic as that which is necessarily excluded from the poem yet haunts it with bereavement and madness.

These two histories force a reconsideration not only of the context within which the poem has been located, which usually stresses the almost comic inclusion of Charles Lamb as 'gentle Charles', but also of Coleridge's revision of the sublime from the aesthetic of pain and terror to one characterized by harmonious ascent through the well-defined categories of the picturesque, the beautiful, and the sublime.⁷ Thomas Weiskel's theory of the relationship of the abyss to the sublime offers a different way of evaluating Coleridge's aesthetics. Weiskel contends that the sublime 'establishes depth because the presentation of unattainability is phenomenologically a negation, a falling away from what might be seized, perceived, known. As an image, it is the abyss. When the intervention of the transcendent becomes specific, however, the image is converted into a symbol, and height takes over as the valorizing perspective.'⁸ Through their association with transgression and pain, Sara's and Mary's narratives provide the negative pole of the sublime experience which Weiskel describes. The experience of the abyss which these narratives suggest is consistent with the nightmare side of Coleridge's experience, given such powerful expression in 'The Pains of Sleep' as the 'unfathomable hell within'. Coleridge's phrase suggests that if the structure of the sublime is characterized by verticality, it has its inferno as well as its paradise. As Arden Reed observes in a different context, 'To assert the power of light, Coleridge finds, is always to discover that however far the light may spread, it will inevitably be surrounded by an engulfing darkness – a positive negation whose frightening dimensions only the pursuit of light could reveal.'⁹ The sublime in Coleridge's writings occupies nadir and zenith, darkness and light, the abyss and the transcendent. So, in 'This Lime-Tree Bower' Coleridge composes sublime experience in the conflicting registers of the divine and the domestic. The abyss, so apparent not only in 'The Pains of

Sleep', but also in 'Limbo', 'Ne Plus Ultra', and Coleridge's documentation of his opium addiction, reveals the shadow side of the sublime experience: an experience connected more overtly and more happily in many of his notebooks, letters, and poems with light, the sun, God, the infinite expanse of the sky, and the ambiguous point where ocean and firmament meet and dissolve into each other. 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', however, like Fuseli's painting, 'The Nightmare', associates the abyss with the feminine and the domestic, a gendered splitting of horror from rapture.

Traditional readings of 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' have not only dissociated the poem from the disturbing narratives of Sara's and Mary's deeds, but they have also oversimplified the speaker's experience of nature by applying to it a kind of aesthetic thermometer which grades the landscape into picturesque, beautiful, and sublime portions. An examination of Coleridge's poetic language in the poem indicates, however, that this aesthetic acclivity is not as readily definable nor as stable as one might wish. Perhaps we locate the three dominant aesthetic categories so readily because we accept that a poem which owes so much to the picturesque tradition ought to progress to the sublime. What we discover instead is that the picturesque introduces a pictorial mode which counteracts the flight toward sublime transcendence.

Such a technique is consistent with the fact that Coleridge, like many aestheticians, did not limit the aesthetic categories to the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque. His own distinctions in his essay 'On the Principles of Genial Criticism' and in his marginalia to Herder's *Kalligone* include not only these three common categories, but also those of the agreeable, the grand, and the majestic; his notebooks offer even closer distinctions, such as the awful, the 'pleasing simple' and the combination of beauty and grandeur which yields 'feminine grandeur'.¹⁰ When formulated in the more problematic discourse of poetry, however, Coleridge's meticulous distinctions are not so carefully observed.

As Burke points out, delineating aesthetic categories is primarily a critical rather than an artistic activity: 'In the infinite variety of natural combinations we must expect to find the qualities of things the most remote imaginable from each other united in the same object. We must expect also to find combinations of the same kind in the works of art'.¹¹ Consonant with Burke's observation, Coleridge's technique in 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' reflects not so much a taxonomy of aesthetic categories, as the subversion of them. As Martin Price indicates, the opposition in Burke's essay between the categories of the sublime and the beautiful opened up a need for a third mediating category – the picturesque.¹² Coleridge himself, as Raimonda Modiano confirms, locates the picturesque in 'the middle

point of the mind's uninterrupted journey from the defined wholeness of a beautiful object to a kind of indefinite unity leading to the sublime'.¹³ Coleridge's revision of the version of 'This Lime-Tree Bower' he originally sent to Southey suggests that he first conceived the poem in this way, moving from the beautiful to the picturesque, from the delightful horizontal line of the 'hill-top edge' to the 'rifted Dell'.¹⁴ The version as published in 1800 rearranges the aesthetic components of the walk, placing the picturesque first as both the introductory and the fundamental landscape of the poem. More importantly, Coleridge infiltrates the categories of the beautiful and the sublime with a vocabulary that resists the progress toward transcendence by giving way to the material tug of the picturesque.

The second section of the poem illustrates this resistance in the ascent of the walking party from the dell to an open landscape, from which they 'view again'

The many-steeped tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow! (ll.22–26)

This brief scene may be viewed as constituting a beautiful interpolation between the picturesque and sublime landscapes, yet, as is suggested by Coleridge's notebook descriptions, it incorporates recognizable picturesque elements, even as it gives expression to the emotion of muted gladness and the sociology of community associated with the beautiful. The upright, geometric precision of steeples and sails and the busyness of the 'many-steeped tract' contrasts, for example, with the beautiful horizontal lines of 'hilly fields and meadows' and aerial perspective of the smooth sea flanked by 'two Isles', a combination of horizontal and vertical planes which typifies the picturesque. The adjective 'magnificent' suggests that Coleridge perhaps had in mind what he refers to as the 'grand' landscape, 'when the parts are numerous and impressive, and are predominate, so as to prevent or greatly lessen the attention to the whole . . .' (CN, II, entry 1070) – or perhaps what, in a notebook entry, he refers to as 'feminine grandeur' (CN, I, entry 1978). In any event, Coleridge does not reserve such symmetry for the beautiful, but also frequently applies it to the picturesque.¹⁵

Similar incursions of the picturesque make their way into the final lines of the second section, which in many respects corresponds to the requirements of the sublime:

Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean!

(ll. 32–37)¹⁶

The remarkable difference between this landscape, so exquisitely dyed by the setting sun, and the tradition of the sublime, however, is the use of clear, vibrant colours. As Marjorie Hope Nicolson points out, colour in the eighteenth century was associated by critics and poets, Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke, James Thomson, and Mark Akenside, not primarily with the sublime, but with the beautiful.¹⁷ Burke, for example, implied that colour may induce sublimity if it is strong, violent, and undiversified, or sad and melancholy; for him, however, strong colour is associated with the sublime only when it is uniform. He concludes his discussion of colour appropriate for the sublime not only by stating his preference for the 'dark and gloomy' but with 'a strict caution . . . against any thing light and riant; as nothing so effectually deadens the whole taste of the sublime' (pp. 81–2, 117).

Burke aside, the sublime landscape in literature was more generally associated with pure crystalline light, and Milton's description of the Chariot of Paternal Deity was considered by Coleridge as by most eighteenth-century aesthetic enthusiasts to be the ultimate sublimity.¹⁸ While Addison first associated colour with beauty, it was left to poets who popularized Newtonian optical theories, like James Thomson and Mark Akenside, to affix colour to beauty via the fancy, while undifferentiated light was associated with reason and the sublime. The 'Summer' portion of Thomson's *The Seasons* exemplifies this association. Sublimity is associated with the 'vertical' sun (l. 432), which

Darts on the head direct his forceful rays.
O'er heaven and earth, far as the ranging eye
Can sweep, a dazzling deluge reigns; and all
From pole to pole is undistinguished blaze.

(ll. 433–36)¹⁹

Thomson's scorching sun is found in Coleridge's *Religious Musings*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and *Fears in Solitude*, but disappears from his poetry by 1800. Generally, Coleridge's sun is not vertical, but 'aslant', casting the beam which produces the longest shadow. He is a poet primarily of the evening, which he associates with the inspiration of 'the visionary hour' in

'Songs of the Pixies' (l. 53) or with an idealized domesticity, expressed in 'To William Wordsworth' as a world constituted by a succession of evenings: 'Eve following eve./Dear tranquil time, when the sweet sense of Home/Is sweetest!' (ll. 91–3).

Colour in 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' is therefore significant, particularly in the context of the poetic tradition. When Thomson focuses on colour, as in his popular elegy 'To the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton', the seven pigments of the rainbow, while vivid, are described as 'delightful' and as the 'source of beauty':

These, when the clouds distill the rosy shower,
Shine out distinct adown the watery bow;
While o'er our heads the dewy vision bends
Delightful, melting on the fields beneath.
Myriads of mingling dyes from these result,
And myriads still remain – infinite source
Of beauty, ever flushing, ever new.

(ll. 112–18)

Coleridge similarly refers to the colours of the rainbow as beautiful in September 1800 (CN, I, entry 807); and again, in 1802, when combined with the atmospheric effects of 'fast-moving, hurrying, hail-mist!' he retains its connotation of beauty, perceiving it as an image of 'fantastic permanence amidst the rapid Change of Tempest – quietness the Daughter of Storm'.²⁰

As is well-known, Coleridge's own formulation of the sublime landscape, like Burke's, invariably included atmospheric effects. Elinor S. Shaffer (p. 215) early pointed out that mist or fog, drizzling rain, and smoke (and in this case 'hail-mist'), 'contribute to the sublime and produce that half-light in which imagination prospers'. In the colour-rich central scene of 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' such powerful atmospheric effects are absent. The diverse parts of the landscape, from the mass of colour produced by the heathflowers to the distant groves, from clouds to margins defined by the ocean, from the distinct colours, purple, yellow, and blue, to the combusive effect of richly burning clouds, form an aesthetically heterogeneous scene.²¹

Colour in this schema is not sublime, but paradoxically makes the sublime moment possible by providing the veil which covers the absolute presence of pure being. Although not an atmospheric effect as such, like the mists, drizzles, and smokes of Coleridge's notebook entries, colour, under the Newtonian system, provides the form of such an effect. Colour thus enables Coleridge to make the necessary move from the landscape itself to the psychological sense of vastness, unity, and diffusion associated with

his explicit statements on the sublime. As he would have been well aware, the veils in the Old Testament Temple were dyed blue, purple, scarlet, and gold, colours similar to those in the poem's landscape. Demarcating the place of the sacred, these veils protected the eyes of the High Priest from the blinding light of the glory of God.²² Elements of the picturesque and the beautiful similarly form the material from which the sublime can be deduced.

The refraction of light into colour in 'This Lime-Tree Bower' departs significantly from Coleridge's method in 'The Eolian Harp' and 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement'. In those earlier poems transcendence is indicated in eighteenth-century fashion by qualities of light which are pure and colourless. In 'The Eolian Harp', for example, the sunbeams which 'dance, like diamonds, on the main' (l. 37) suggest the self-reflective splendour of the white light which Dante in the *Paradiso* equated with God's ultimate sufficiency. By contrast, Coleridge's use of colour in his description of the sunset in 'This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison' uses picturesque technique to intimate the sublimity of pristine light (emblematic of God) behind and beyond the world of colour – thus also foreclosing the narratives of Mary and Sara which adumbrate the abyss and the aesthetics of darkness, terror, and pain.

While colour, even as it makes sublime experience possible, grounds the poem in the picturesque, the figure of Charles with his face to the sun's glory turns the poem away from pictorial conventions towards the sublime. Mythopoetic formation acts here in concert with dissolution. Constrained by lameness and absence, the poet's gaze extends beyond the confines of his bower to place Charles in a vision of landscape which is governed by the picturesque; the radiance of the sun, meanwhile, dissolves particularity so that form becomes 'less gross than bodily' – 'Silent with swimming sense' (ll. 41, 39). The poet's male counterpart, who with himself and the 'Almighty Spirit' form a kind of trinity, is characterized by a condition of borderlessness; transgression and violation are thus circumscribed and delimited, safely confined to the feminine, while the formative activity of the gaze is saved for a masculine agent.

The relationship between formation and dissolution established through the poet's focus on the figure of Charles is suggestively reinforced in the concluding lines of the poem which refer to the sun as 'the mighty Orb's dilated glory' casting its gaze over the whole scene, over both the wide, colour-strewn landscape and the poet's imprisoning bower. The vision of the solitary poet fails, however, when the rook crosses over the sun and vanishes in its light. Coleridge uses this image in a number of other poems, at least two of which project the human body against the sun's orb so as to

produce a form which, in the process of obliteration, becomes a cicatrix. So, in *Religious Musings*, describing the 'one omnipresent Mind,/Omnific' (ll. 105–6), Coleridge silhouettes the 'constant soul' (l. 108) against the sun:

From himself he flies,
Stands in the sun, and with no partial gaze
Views all creation; and he loves it all,
And blesses it, and calls it very good!

(ll. 110–13)

Similarly, in *The Destiny of Nations*, Coleridge describes the 'bodily sense' (l. 18) of creation by depicting a gazing figure against the sun's blaze:

and we in this low world
Placed with our backs to bright Reality,
That we may learn with young unwounded ken
The substance from its shadow.

(ll. 20–23)

These images are less explicit than that of the rook crossing the sun. Nevertheless, they suggest Coleridge's preoccupation with affirming the sublime scene only as it is scarred or transgressed by figuration, and in particular suggest his effort to bring a human dimension to an otherwise transcendent object. Coleridge appears to achieve this transaction at the cost of particularity and identity. If this is the case, that cost is exacted for a greater gain. Through obliteration of the figure's particularity, Coleridge suppresses the problematic role of history, which in this poem is founded on the feminine scene of accident and strange calamity. The dangerous margins of the body, identified with history and the feminine, are safely transformed into a hieroglyph of the de-sexed human form.

The process of formation and dissolution in this poem thus supports the construction of transcendence, as does the intriguing poetic juxtaposition of Charles' 'strange calamity' with the landscape so alive with colour. Rather than transforming the aesthetics of terror into a risk-free or 'riant' landscape, the refraction of light represents a transaction between history and divinity. While divinity cloaks the accidents of lived experience with the vapours and refractions symbolic of transcendence, it cannot be articulated apart from the remnants of historical particularities. The vestigial reference in the phrase, 'strange calamity', to Mary's murder of her mother and wounding of her father thus urgently recalls that uncanny event, the wounding of the poet's foot, which Coleridge sustained in the epigraph. These founding calamities enable Coleridge to explore and anatomize a

dialectic of formation and dissolution through which the poet is permitted to experience sublimity as both recuperative and annihilating. Indeed the tone of the poem throughout is melancholy and bemused. Attuned to sorrow, loneliness, and loss, it is nevertheless joyfully formative. Caught by the glance of the poet, the 'solitary humblebee' sings in the beanflower, an image of visionary creation; the lone rook, creaking as it 'vanish[es] in light', is dissolved, uncreated in the 'mighty Orb's dilated glory'.²³

The experience of sublimity in this poem is not, therefore, restricted to a transcendent moment of visionary utterance initiated by a picturesque scene. More powerfully, sublimity is evoked through a picturesque technique which veils two antithetical moments, the divine and the domestic, vision and nightmare. Peopled by women, the domestic demarcates the sublime through deeds which resonate with sacrificial implications. By wounding the poet's foot, Sara creates the condition for his inclusion in the heritage of seers and visionaries. The initial narrative alluded to in the epigraph thus underscores the fact that the sublime's revelation in history can be effected only through the effacement of the figure (in this case, Sara's) which makes its articulation in history possible. Deeds such as hers, Douglas suggests (p. 8), are fundamental to the sacred. 'Sacred rules', she states, 'are thus merely rules hedging divinity off, and uncleanness is the two-way danger of contact with divinity'. Kristeva (p. 90) elaborates the point that crime, in particular, is separated from relatively harmless acts like Sara's not in the order of Real event, but in the order of logic. 'Biblical impurity' she maintains, 'is thus always already a *logicizing* of what departs from the symbolic'. It is the same deed perceived in a different social and logical order. Thus, while Sara's spilt milk is in one order a simple domestic accident, it is in another the expression of a mythic taboo; and Mary's crime, under a different logic, bears all the marks of sacrifice.

While the figure of Jesus' self-sacrifice may seem antithetical to Coleridge's Unitarian persuasion in 1797, it is not inconsistent with the struggle his poetry of this time engages between the yearnings of the heart and the contingencies of religious belief. As David Collings observes in his analysis of *Religious Musings* (p. 178), Coleridge disperses symbolic violence throughout that poem, and 'risks accepting the sacrificial logic of symbolization'; Collings thus finds in Coleridge a 'refus[al] to see Christ's death as sacrifice, rewriting it in terms of sublimation'. It is possible to read Coleridge's diffusion of the symbolic elements of sacrifice, however, as a refusal to relinquish sacrifice, which is manifested later in his life by his inability to stave off the doctrines of atonement and incarnation central to trinitarian belief. The refusal of the 'sacrificial logic of symbolization' implies a rejection of the contaminating, signifying figure which permeates

his poetry like the Simoom, which taints the noon and threatens death (see *Religious Musings*, ll. 268–70). The humanizing of the sun's transcendent blaze, its transformation from image to Word, from sun to Son, represents a similar contamination by which in 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' the 'Almighty Spirit' is made intelligible. The horror of sacrificial logic is Real (in the Lacanian sense) only in the abject female world of Sara and Mary, the space of narrative and therefore history, while the safely symbolic domain of the 'Almighty Spirit' is humanized not through the wounded or broken body, but by Charles' silhouette and the 'creeking' rook 'vanishing in light'. As such, Sara's and Mary's narratives are figureless, but mark the historical moment in which a man's heart may be transformed.

In one of his *Lectures on Revealed Religion* in 1795, Coleridge had expostulated that 'In a moral sense a Sacrifice is nowhere considered by the Prophets as a cause operating on Deity, but merely as the means meliorating our own Hearts'.²⁴ In this gentrification of taboo and attenuation of the link between sacrifice and the logic of the symbolic, Coleridge skirts the problem so frequently documented in his poetry, in which the sun-like divinity is given definition by tainting figures which perform the function not only of sign but of surety. Were we to accept Coleridge's assertion that sacrifice is 'merely . . . meliorating', Sara's and Mary's unwelcomed and calamitous acts would remain shrunk beneath the text as the ejection of the poem's founding situations, as the abjectal, better-forgotten moments of domestic infelicity. Indeed, Coleridge's lecture proceeds (p. 203) in a vocabulary which, while it anticipates 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', suggests this very reading: 'Wherever therefore, whether in the Prophets or in St. Paul the Messiah is represented as having sacrificed himself for us it must be understood – as a necessary means relative to man not a motive influencing the Almighty. To awaken Gratitude, to confirm Purity, to evidence sincerity the Pious Jew for himself offered a part of his property, the first fruits of his Flock – to effect the same ends in others Christ offered himself. In this lecture, Coleridge suppresses the sacrificial moment in order to document its moral effect. But his attempt to affirm purity while avoiding the sacrificial logic of impurity founders in 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison'; the poetic text retains traces of Sara's and Mary's narratives, revealed as the poet explores images not only of community but of isolation, not only of formation but of dissolution, not only of effervescent colour but of the 'unsunn'd', the 'shadow', the 'late twilight'.

'The abject', says Kristeva, 'is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being' (p. 11). In pushing these narratives beyond the pale of the poetic text, the poet is able to place himself as intermediary between two poles of

sublimity. His lime-tree bower is both prison and sanctuary, a place of loss and the place in which he experiences the order of the sacred. It is a border post inhabited by a poet, characteristically lamed and blinded, whose wound and whose blindness mark both his abjection and his sublimity. R

Dept. of English
University of San Francisco

1. Richard Haven, *Patterns of Consciousness: An Essay on Coleridge* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1969), p. 72.
2. Quotations from Coleridge's poems are from *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 2 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1912).
3. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) I, p. 334; hereafter CL. For an analysis of the publishing history of this poem see Haven, 63–73, and John Gutteridge, 'Scenery and Ecstasy: Three of Coleridge's Blank Verse Poems', in *Approaches to Coleridge: Biographical and Critical Essays*, ed. by Donald Sultana (London: Vision; Totowa: Barnes & Noble, 1981), pp. 151–71; hereafter Gutteridge.
4. Melanie Klein discusses the role of part-objects throughout her 1935 essay, *A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States in The Writings of Melanie Klein*, ed. by Roger Money-Kyrle, 4 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1975) I, pp. 262–89. For an indication of Klein's indebtedness to Freud on this subject see J. Laplanche, J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), pp. 301–02. Klein influenced Lacan's notion of the objet-a, which he addresses in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 103–4, 185–6, and 267–74.
5. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966). Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 1–7.
6. The one surviving letter, however, which Coleridge sent to Charles Lamb following Mary Lamb's attack on their mother and father begins with a sentence which powerfully evokes the Longinian sublime: 'Your letter, my friend, struck me with a mighty horror. It rushed upon me and stupefied my feelings' (CL, I, p. 238). As Longinus states, '... sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude', *Longinus on the Sublime*, ed. by W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 43.
7. See especially Anne K. Mellor's influential article, which interprets the poem as moving 'up the ladder of the hierarchically ordered aesthetic experiences of eighteenth-century academic art theory from the picturesque through the beautiful to the sublime', in "'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" and the Categories of English Landscape', *Studies in Romanticism*, 18 (1979), pp. 253–70 and 260.
8. Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 24–5.

9. Arden Reed, *Romantic Weather: The Climates of Coleridge and Baudelaire* (Hanover and London: Brown University Press, 1983), p. 69; hereafter Reed.
10. *On the Principles of Genial Criticism*, ed. by John Shawcross, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1907) II, p. 226; *Marginalia*, ed. by George Whalley, Bollingen Collected Coleridge Series 12, 4 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980–) II, p. 1070. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, Bollingen Series 50, 4 vols (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957) I, entries 1228 and 1798; hereafter CN.
11. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), p. 124.
12. Martin Price, 'The Picturesque Moment' in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. by Frederick W. Hillis and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 262–63; hereafter Price.
13. Raimonda Modiano, *Coleridge & the Concept of Nature* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1985), p. 26; hereafter Modiano. I am grateful to Professor Modiano for helping me to clarify several points in this essay.
14. Although the horizontal line is usually associated with the beautiful, in his notebooks Coleridge often describes the line created by hills as picturesque. In this he follows Uvedale Price's insistence on the playfulness and caprice of the picturesque landscape. For examples from Coleridge's early notebooks, see I, entries 415, 495, 549, 1175, 1227, 1266, 1433, 1452, 1485. For discussions of this facet of the picturesque, see Price, pp. 275–87 and Modiano, pp. 110–11.
15. One is struck, in reading Coleridge's notebook entries, by his fascination with geometric forms and symmetrical arrangements in any category of landscape. In June–July 1800, for example, he records a picturesque scene with resemblances to the 'roaring dell' of 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', but which delights him for its symmetries: 'Stand to the right hand close, by the bellying rock, so as to see the top of the waterfall only by the Daylight on the wet rock – the arch right above the little imitation of the great waterfall (connections in nature) between the arch & the great Waterfall an arch of Trees . . . Going up to the Force notice the Sheepfold the higher – of whose parall[el]ogram is faced with fern, one a plume, the rest bunches of parsley fern . . .' (CN, I, entry 753, Coleridge's emphasis).
16. These lines are a version of a notebook entry written in 1796:

The Sun (for now his Orb
Gan slowly sink),
Shot half his rays aslant the heath, whose flowers
Purpled the mountain's broad & level top,
Rich was his bed of Clouds: & wide beneath
Expecting Ocean smiled with dimpled face.

(CN, I, entry 157)

17. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Newton Demands the Muse: Newton's Opticks and the Eighteenth Century Poets* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1963), p. 118.
18. *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Odyssey; Bobbs-Merrill, 1957) VI, II, 749–79; hereafter PL. See Elinor S. Shaffer's discussion of Coleridge's reference to Milton's phrase, 'far off his coming shone' (PL, VI, l. 768) in 'Coleridge's Revolution in the Standard of Taste', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 28 (1969), p. 218. Interestingly, although Milton incorporates the rainbow into this description with the phrase, 'and colors

of the show'ry Arch' (PL, VI, 1. 760), poets tended to follow Addison's linkage between color and beauty, reserving for the sublime the pure light and blaze of the heavenly scene.

19. All quotations from Thomson's poetry are taken from *The Complete Poetical Works of James Thomson*, ed. by J. Logie Robertson (London: Oxford University Press, 1908).

20. CN, I, entry 1246. Coleridge makes his association between the rainbow and the beautiful more explicit in May 1812 in his notes for one of his Shakespeare Lectures: 'Even in the storm & rain-clash of Passion Poetry presumes Beauty, compare the Rainbow in the fast-moving, hurrying Hail-Mist. -' (CN, III, entry 4158).

21. Coleridge's discussions of color after 1800, as James A. W. Heffernan shows, endorse the romantic inclination for 'the theory and practice of optical fusion.' See 'The English Romantic Perception of Color' in *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities*, ed. by Karl Kroeber and William Walling (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 144. 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', however, written before Coleridge's formulation of his notions of colour, does not exhibit the tendency which Heffernan describes, and is not mentioned in his discussion.

22. As Trevor H. Levere points out, Coleridge had not yet lost his admiration for Newton when this poem was written. See *Poetry Realized in Nature: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Early Nineteenth-Century Science* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 9–10 and 149–53. Significantly, in 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', Coleridge transforms Newton's hexameral specification of refracted colour into the colours of the tabernacle veils, which hid the 'glory of God' (Exodus 36–39, passim, and 40:35). Julia Kristeva notes the colours of the tabernacle in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 224 and n., 235–6. See Gutteridge, pp. 163–65, for a close and informative discussion of colour imagery and Coleridge's annotation to these lines, 'You remember I am a Berkeleyian'. Gutteridge supports the notion that colour in this section constitutes a veiling technique, as does Reed, p. 188.

23. Although the participle 'creeking' (creaking) is normally used to describe sound produced by inanimate objects, Coleridge uses it similarly in September 1800 to describe a sound his son, Derwent, made while gravely ill: 'The Child hour after hour made a noise exactly like the Creeking of a door which is being shut slowly to prevent its creeking' (CN, I, entry 813). Coleridge's unusual use of the word in the instance of his son, and in particular his connection between the precariousness of the child's life and the closing of a door, underscores its association in his mind not with joy but with potential loss: a shutting out of life.

24. In *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, ed. by Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, Bollingen Collected Coleridge Series 1, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) I, pp. 202–203.