

Coleridge's Late Confessions: Personification, Convention, and Free Agency

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Abstract

In this essay, I freshly examine Coleridge's late poems, asking how several respond to his abiding fear of authors and readers surrendering their free wills to the fashions and conditioned attitudes of nineteenth-century print culture. Connecting this anxiety to Coleridge's views of personification, the Bible, and his own public image, I interpret his late poems as confessions of the conventional determination of writing and reading that he resisted in his critical prose. This late concession, I suggest, might also be an unexpected defense of free agency: by displaying their conventionality, these late poems appear—at least to several early and recent readers—to reflect the strategy of a self-aware and self-determining poet.

According to a hard-dying story he helped invent, Coleridge gave up writing serious poetry around 1800 and eased the pain of failure in research, every now and then tossing off verses that many critics have been content to call “second-rate” (Rajan 237). As a result of this popular narrative, Coleridge's later poetry has been slow in attracting serious attention. The first to comment on a wide range of poems from Coleridge's final decades was Morton Paley in *Coleridge's Later Poetry* (1996). More recently, Eric Wilson, in *Coleridge's Melancholia: An Anatomy of Limbo* (2004), has praised the late poems for their courageous meditations on the insight, dread, and solipsism that attend states of “existential limbo” (7). Grateful to Paley and Wilson, I take a different approach to Coleridge's later poems, examining how several respond to his career-long fear of authors and readers becoming automatons, surrendering their free wills to the time-bound protocols of print culture. By relating this anxiety to Coleridge's views of personification, the Bible, and his own public image, I believe we can see that his late poems confess what his defense of free authorial and readerly agency in his prose had already implied:

writers and readers never elude entirely the determining conventions and conditioned prejudices of their literary culture.

I. An Ideal Process of Reading: Coleridge's Prose Confessions

In the 1818 *Friend*, Coleridge makes a "confession," partly to preempt criticism of his obscurity: his familiarity with the "Ancients and . . . the elder Writers in the modern languages" has influenced his "difficult" style, which will frustrate "the habit of receiving pleasure without any exertion of thought" encouraged by "habitual novel reading" (*Friend* I 19-20). Such a difficult style will demand active cooperation from the reader:

I . . . require the attention of my reader to become my fellow-labourer. The primary facts essential to the intelligence of my principles I can prove to others only as far as I can prevail on them to . . . make their own minds the objects of their stedfast [*sic*] attention. (I 21)

Analyzing his own mental history to account for his dense prose, Coleridge asks readers to determine the authority of his words through strenuous introspection. Here Coleridge resorts to a confessional mode of writing that he employed in prose throughout his life to model an ideal reading process, according to which a reader is an author's "fellow-labourer": a text is only fully realized through their shared introspection and reflective labor.

Coleridge performs a related confession in the tenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria* (1817). He represents himself as a younger man, absorbed in meditation on the foundations of religion and morals. A basic question confronts him: can we be sure of the existence of anything beyond our own perceptions? "[W]hat proof had I of the outward *existence* of any thing? Of this sheet of paper for instance, as a thing in itself, separate from the phaenomenon or image in my perception" (*Biographia* I 200). The phrase "this sheet of paper" erases the process of printing

and publication to create an imagined situation in which the reader encounters the same page that Coleridge reflectively composes. Later in *Aids to Reflection* (1825), Coleridge asks the reader to join him in reflecting on the “characters, which I am now shaping on this paper” (*Aids* 397). These passages declare the texts in which they appear unfinished and unprinted, locating their completion in the present-tense convergence of the reader’s attention with Coleridge’s self-analysis.

Near the end of *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816), Coleridge offers a tutorial in interpreting the confessional structure of his writing:

In reviewing the foregoing pages, I am apprehensive that they may be thought to resemble the overflow of an earnest mind rather than an orderly premeditated composition. Yet this imperfection of form will not be altogether uncompensated, if it should be the means of presenting with greater liveliness the feelings and impressions under which they were written. [This defect might] induce some future traveller engaged in the like journey to take the same station and to look through the same medium. (43)

The past tense (“were written”) acknowledges the temporal barrier between the current reader and Coleridge’s “feelings and impressions” when writing. Yet as a whole the passage presents the disordered prose of *The Statesman’s Manual* as a “medium” “through” which a reader might “look” to revive within himself the state of mind in which the lay sermon was composed, extending Coleridge’s reflective “journey” as his or her own.

Describing his page as if he were writing it as the reader reads, and asking the reader to treat his imperfect prose as a medium through which to feel again what he has felt in composing,

Coleridge works to support a hermeneutic paradigm in which a work is realized through the free cooperation of writing and reading agents, each attending to his or her experiences as they are brought into miraculous alignment across space and time: “Reader! . . . we may find within us what no words can put there” (*Statesman’s* 92-3). Yet Coleridge worries elsewhere in his prose that writers and readers are being coerced by contemporary conventions and institutions governing literary production and consumption. When representing and satirizing this threat to the free agency of writers and readers, Coleridge relies heavily on personification.

II. Personification, Threatened Agency, and the Literary Market

In notes for an 1818 lecture on allegory, Coleridge remarks that the “dullest and most defective parts of Spenser are those in which we are compelled to think of his agents as allegories” (*Lectures* II 103). Here Coleridge resists one of two transformations that personification can perform. Personification often turns abstractions into persons: the Christian virtue of faithfulness becomes Faithful the companion of Christian. Yet personification can also convert persons into abstractions. In the *Faerie Queene*, as Angus Fletcher observes, Spenser’s Malbecco is changed from an “eminently real . . . jealous, petty-minded husband” into a bodiless wraith named “Geolosie [Jealousy]” (49-50). When censuring Spenser for “compelling us to think of his agents as allegories,” Coleridge has in mind the second, abstracting force of personification, which he believes transforms characters from imitations of “real” human agency into automatons acting out an extrinsic “allegoric purpose” (*Lectures* II 103). The first capacity of personification, to grant independence and human agency to abstractions and passions, Coleridge relates to delusions he labels “enthusiastic.” For Coleridge, the enthusiast responds to the products of his own mind as if they were “real Objects” (*Aids* 391). Coleridge writes that

Martin Luther, half-asleep while reading the Bible, beheld “a brain image of the Devil, vivid enough to have acquired apparent *Outness*” (*Friend* I 140). Luther unwittingly personifies a projection of his own tired mind, treating it as an independent agent.

Relying on these assumptions, Coleridge uses personification in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) to criticize the threats he believes are posed to free agency by contemporary means of producing and consuming literature:

[A]s to the devotees of the circulating libraries, I dare not compliment their *pass-time*, or rather *kill-time*, with the name of *reading*. Call it rather a sort of beggarly daydreaming, during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing . . . while the whole *materiel* and imagery of the doze is supplied *ab extra* by a sort of mental *camera obscura* manufactured at the printing office, which *pro tempore* fixes, reflects and transmits the moving phantasms of one man’s delirium, so as to people the barrenness of an hundred other brains afflicted with the same trance or suspension of all common sense and all definite purpose. (I 48)

In Coleridge’s haughty satire, the entertaining reading found in circulating libraries exposes readers to the two threats to human agency reflected in personification. Amusing “novels” (I 48) transform readers’ “brains” into camera obscuras, dark boxes into which the “moving phantasms” of a hack writer’s “delirium” are projected as characters that “people” a shadowy fictional world, so that the idle fancies and clichés of popular fiction, conjured up by market demand, replace the real human life outside the “trance.” By temporarily confusing “manufactured” shadows of the mind with persons, readers experience the first threat to independent agency embodied in

personification: enthusiastic delusion. They also experience the second, depersonalizing force of personification, surrendering their intellectual and imaginative freedom to the hackneyed daydream that possesses them. They play the role that Coleridge earlier attributed to sense objects arbitrarily made to represent “abstract notions” in allegories (*Statesman’s* 30): they are “automatons, acting out a pre-existing script in which they had no hand” (Wilson 122).

By the early nineteenth century, many periodicals were employing anonymous reviewers, which meant that individual journalists could seem to issue literary judgments on behalf of a journal’s entire staff, and potentially its readership (Klancher 48). Perhaps anticipating another savage review of his work (Hazlitt had anonymously shredded *The Statesman’s Manual* in several journals), Coleridge draws on personification in *Biographia Literaria* to satirize anonymous reviewing: “[T]he multitudinous PUBLIC, shaped into personal unity by the magic of abstraction, sits nominal despot on the throne of criticism. But alas! as in other despotisms, it but echoes the decisions of its invisible ministers” (*Biographia* I 59). Claiming to speak for “the reading public,” anonymous reviewers identify their own (or their periodical’s) fashionable tastes with a personification of universal consent—“the multitudinous PUBLIC, shaped into personal unity”—in order to dictate the choices of actual readers in the literary market and scare authors into submission.

III. Bibliolatry and Conditioned Expectations in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*

In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge identifies abuses he finds in the literary market with two subversions of human agency represented by personification—granting independence to mental shadows; turning persons into exponents of extrinsic forces. When Coleridge meditates on the Bible in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1820-1824), he inadvertently confesses the

vulnerability of his own hermeneutics to the same threats.¹ In this essay cast as letters to an unnamed friend, Coleridge opposes the belief prevalent in his time that the Bible was infallibly dictated by God, calling this idea “Bibliolatry” (*Shorter Works* 1142). His use of personification reveals that he rejects bibliolatry out of the concern for free agency that fueled his satire of circulating libraries and anonymous reviewers in *Biographia*.

The bibliolatrous doctrine of infallibility, Coleridge contends in *Confessions*, reduces “the whole Body of Holy Writ” to “a hollow Passage for a [divine] Voice, a Voice that mocks the voices of many men and speaks in their names . . . !” (*Shorter Works* 1134). According to Coleridge, bibliolatry thereby encourages potentially enthusiastic use of the Bible. By the 1820s, “the work of [evangelical] Bible societies” and “advances of the publishing industry” had “brought Bibles to nearly every parish and home in England” (Barbeau 27, 30). Coleridge observes that because they think of scriptural authors as “*Pens* in the hand of” a divine “Writer,” who express perfectly “God’s own” self-sufficient “words,” groups such as the British and Foreign Bible Society distribute Bibles without “notes and comments” (*Shorter Works* 1148). For Coleridge, increased and undirected private reading of the Bible has encouraged people to interpret it by personal experience alone. Combined with belief in scripture’s infallibility, this creates a situation in which “the whims of individual fancy could easily be mistaken for the dictates of the Divine” (Barbeau 32).

Bibliolatry poses the two threats to the freedom of writers and readers that Coleridge associates with personification. The doctrine reduces persons to passive mediums for transcendental truth: the biblical authors become hollow masks through which God speaks; this in turn generates practices of publishing and reading that encourage attribution of independent agency to mental phantasms: bible societies distribute the scriptures to every home, often without

commentary, and readers imagine that the desires and impressions they project into the text proceed from God himself. This subversion of free human agency is historically conditioned: “those whose minds are prepossessed by the Doctrine . . . from earliest Childhood” associate it with “the very word, Bible” (*Shorter Works* 1129).

Could Coleridge’s criticism of bibliolators apply to him—might not the truth *he* finds in the Bible be the reflection of his own conditioned prejudices? Coleridge nearly admits this:

I neither can, or dare, throw off the strong and awful [*sic*] prepossession in [the Bible’s] favor, certain as I am that a large part of the Light and Life, in and by which I see, love and embrace . . . a living Body of [Christian] Faith and Knowledge, . . . have been directly or indirectly derived to me from this sacred Volume—and [I am] unable to determine what I do not owe to [the Bible’s] influences. (*Shorter Works* 1120)

As Stephen Prickett observes of this passage, “‘Light’ and ‘life’ are not objects of consciousness or perception, they are their *conditions*”(5). Perhaps Coleridge’s “prepossession” in “favor” of the Bible is conditioned by growing up the son of a clergyman and living in a society that still largely assumes God’s revelation through Scripture: “unbelievers,” Coleridge worries, will “say, that the Bible is for me only what the Koran is for the deaf Turk” (*Shorter Works* 1120).

Coleridge’s refutation of Bibliolatry threatens his own hermeneutics: it exposes the ways conventions of producing and responding to literature transform texts into confirmations of reader’s time-bound prejudices. Perhaps compelled by the implications of his own argument, in *Confessions* Coleridge solicits the aid of a third agent. To support his claim that the Bible conveys its truths as the experiences of its writers and readers, shaped by the same Holy Spirit, converge across time and space, Coleridge confesses his own experience of reading the Psalms:

“I have so often submitted myself” to the “Royal Harper [King David]” as “a ‘many-stringed Instrument’ for his fire-tipt fingers to traverse, while every several nerve of emotion, passion, thought that thrids the *flesh-and-blood* of . . . our common Humanity, responds to the Touch” (*Shorter Works* 1136). A third agent, “common Humanity,” indwells the Psalmist and Coleridge, integrating them into a trans-historical nervous system (“every several nerve that thrids the *flesh-and-blood*”). This “common Humanity . . . responds” in place of Coleridge and the Psalmist, so that authorship and reception coincide in a voluntary response to a divine “Touch.” “Our” in “our common Humanity” surreptitiously extends its reach not only to Coleridge and David, but also to the reader of *Confessions*, who stands in for the unnamed friend to whom Coleridge addresses his confessions about the Bible: “you, my dear Sir! before whom [my] answer [to bibliolatry] is made, are . . . my *Confessor*” (1133). By absorbing individuals into a personified Humanity, Coleridge gains the interpersonal medium he needs to bring writers and readers into cooperation. It seems that Coleridge can suppress the disquieting implications of his argument in *Confessions* only by relying on the depersonalizing power of personification he has so often criticized.

IV. Coleridge’s Late Confessions

In *Statesman’s Manual* (1816), *Biographia Literaria* (1817), *The Friend* (1818 ed.), *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1820-1824), and *Aids to Reflection* (1825), Coleridge uses a confessional voice, locating the completion of his and other texts in the free cooperation of writers and readers across time and space. He also develops a confessional voice in poetry expressing his dejected paralysis, a theme central to a series of poems beginning with “Dejection: an Ode” (1802) and its initial incarnation in “A Letter To [Sara Hutchinson]” (1802), continuing

through works such as “The Pains of Sleep” (1803) and “Constancy to an Ideal Object” (1804-1822?), and ending with the three late poems I shortly discuss: “Youth and Age” (1823, pub. 1827), “Love’s Apparition and Evanishment: An Allegoric Romance” (1833), and “The Pang More Sharp than All: An Allegory” (1825 and after, pub. 1834).² While and shortly after writing *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, Coleridge in these late confession poems concedes what he summons “common Humanity” to suppress in that work: the constriction of writing and reading by historically conditioned expectations and conventions of producing and consuming literature.

When interpreting Coleridge’s later career, his contemporaries often followed the lead of his first major confessional poem, “Dejection: an Ode” (1802):

[Unnamed affliction] Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,

My shaping spirit of Imagination.

For not to think of what I needs must feel,

But to be still and patient, all I can;

And haply by abstruse research to steal

From my own nature all the natural Man—

This was my sole resource, my only plan:

Till that which suits a part infects the whole,

And now is almost grown the habit of my Soul. (PW [CC] 85-93)³

Publishing fragments of poems, and promising philosophic treatises he never published, Coleridge did much to further the impression that the Sage of Highgate had succumbed to dejected metaphysicolia after bringing forth a few works of narcotic sublimity. This story, still popular, could be called the narrative of “S.T.C.,” the subscription Coleridge most often used for his works.

As Paley suggests, Coleridge probably encouraged S.T.C.'s story to preempt criticism of his later poems as failed attempts to repeat earlier successes (5-6). Yet by the publication of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Hazlitt's unsigned reviews, among others, had demonstrated how harshly and persistently the story of S.T.C. could be turned against Coleridge: adrift in a philosophic haze, Hazlitt claimed in the 1817 *Edinburgh Review*, the older Coleridge was left "in a state of suspended animation 'twixt dreaming and awake," unable to deliver a single intelligible work of poetry or prose (*Critical Heritage* 298). Even relatively sympathetic reviewers repeated variations on the theme, as in this response in the *Literary Gazette* to Coleridge's 1828 *Poetical Works*:

[H]ow much more might not, ought not, Coleridge to have done! His fine imagination has rioted in its own idleness; he has been content to think, or rather to dream, so much of his life away. (*Critical Heritage* 522)

By the early 1820s, as Julian Knox has observed, Coleridge was aware of how his "literary persona" could be "ever recast and reinterpreted by the perceiving public" (443). S.T.C. had passed beyond his author's control to become a persona through which Coleridge's work was inevitably mediated to the public, often to his disadvantage.

In the late confession poems, Coleridge concedes what his biblical criticism and the manipulation of his public persona had implied: readers and writers never fully escape becoming personifications of their literary culture, acting out scripts written beforehand and finding in texts shadows cast by their conditioned expectations. These poems bring together the familiar story of S.T.C.'s dejected decline with sentimentalized features of the romance genre. Coleridge's "Christabel," which Scott and Byron had seen in manuscript, in many ways inspired "the movement to recreate romance," and by the 1820s their supporting testimony had established

Coleridge's reputation as the initiator of this effort (Curran 146).⁴ Yet before "Christabel," Coleridge composed poems such as "Songs of the Pixies" (1793) and "In the Manner of Spenser" (1795), which contained more sentimental romantic elements: invocations of fairies (the "Pixies" in "Songs"); fanciful personifications with attendant trains (e.g. "EVE" attended by her "duteous Band" of "SOMBRE HOURS" [PW/CC] "Songs" 76, 79, 78]); and nostalgic allusions to "the Bowers of old Romance" ("Manner" 35). They recalled the eighteenth-century "faery" poetry that Addison had helped inspire with his essays in *The Spectator*.⁵ Coleridge was embarrassed by these poems shortly after publishing them in 1797, and later glossed the title of "In the Manner of Spenser" as "Little Potatoes in the *Manner* of the Pine-Apple."⁶

Nevertheless, Coleridge resurrects the "faery" romance of his juvenile works in his late confessions, fitting these poems to the domesticated romance of the popular literary annuals in which he published several of them. Astonishingly popular in the 1820s and 1830s, literary annuals were gilded gift-books of minor poems, stories, and elegant engravings aimed at middle and upper-class women (Manning 44). The tamed romance of these annuals is highlighted in the subtitle of the 1828 literary annual in which Coleridge first published "Youth and Age": "THE LITERARY SOUVENIR; OR, CABINET OF POETRY AND ROMANCE." An epigraph taken from Scott's *Rokeby* (1813) sums up the contents of this romantic cabinet:

I have song of war for knight;

Lay of love for lady bright;

Fairy tale to lull the heir;

Goblin grim the maids to scare.

(Canto V.ix.1-4)

There is something for the whole household. The romantic literary souvenirs of 1828 include poems about tragic love (Laetitia Elizabeth Landon's poem "Juliet after the Masquerade"), short

stories set in the supernatural East (“City of Demons”), and maudlin Spenserian stanzas to an ideal woman (“A Picture”).

The Keepsake of 1829 contains “The Garden of Boccaccio [*sic*],” a contribution to the “cabinet of romance” that Coleridge was commissioned to write for an engraving of a scene from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (**Fig. 1: “Garden of Boccaccio” engraving**; Paley 85-6). “The Garden” is not a full confession of Coleridge’s dejected paralysis, but it opens by rewriting “Dejection” and has several qualities in common with Coleridge’s late confession poems:

Of late, in one of those most weary hours,
When life seems emptied of all genial powers,
A dreary mood, which he who ne’er has known
May bless his happy lot, I sate alone;
And, from the numbing spell to win relief,
Call’d on the PAST for thought of glee or grief.
In vain! bereft alike of grief or glee,
I sate and cow’r’d o’er my own vacancy!
[Yet, then] O Friend! . . .
I but half saw that quiet hand of thine
Place on my desk this exquisite design,
Boccaccio’s Garden and its faery,
The love, the joyaunce, and the gallantry!
An IDYLL, with Boccaccio’s spirit warm,
Framed in the silent poesy of form.

(*Keepsake* p. 282)

The Spenserian diction (“faery,” “joyaunce,” “gallantry”) signals the domesticated romantic context in which Coleridge is adopting the persona and narrative by now so familiar to the reading public: S.T.C.’s loss of “genial,” or creative, “powers.” The poem was supposedly inspired when a domestic, and implicitly female, “Friend” placed on the poet’s desk the engraving now included in the annual. Here the present-tense alignment between author and reader, which Coleridge encouraged in his confessional prose, is achieved through the most prized commodity in literary annual publishing: “this exquisite design,” the engraving upon which the commissioned poem is based, and which the reader fictionally beholds at the same time as the Coleridgean speaker, S.T.C., recounts his dejection.⁷ S.T.C. recalls the vision inspired in him by the engraving: a nostalgic dream of his youth in which a procession of personifications foreshadowed his popular biography, his passage from poetry to abstruse research. He beheld “a matron . . . of sober mien” called “PHILOSOPHY,” who “play’d with bird and flower,” still disguised in the form of “a faery child” called “POESY,” and as yet “unconscious of herself” and her future grey-haired prominence. The vision recycles the quaint eighteenth-century personifications of Coleridge’s juvenile poems. Next, S.T.C. apostrophizes the engraver (F. Englehart) as he enters the picture on his reader’s page:

Thanks, gentle artist! now I can descry

Thy fair creation with a mastering eye.

And *all* awake! And now in fix’d gaze stand,

Now wander through the Eden of thy hand;

. . . I see no longer! I myself am there,

. . . With old Boccacio’s soul I stand possest,

And breathe an air like life, that swells my chest.

(*Keepsake* pp. 283-4)

S.T.C. claims literal entry into this miniature Eden—"I myself am there"—even as he stages a patent fiction that relies on a series of graphic and literary mediations. He becomes an artificial version of Coleridge's ideal reader, "possest" with the "soul" of a past author, Boccaccio, by way of F. Englehart's engraving, of Thomas Stothard's drawing, of the garden described in the *Decameron*. S.T.C.'s fictional transmigration also depends on the domesticated romantic conventions he has rehearsed: the antiquated Spenserian diction and the eighteenth-century personifications. Coleridge turns the version of himself circulating in the literary world, S.T.C., into a personification of the very *modus operandi* of literary annuals. The domesticated romance and sympathetic *ekphrasis* expected of literary-annual commissions⁸ are the means of S.T.C.'s post-inspired poetic life. Artificially supported by his multimedia setting and mediating literary conventions, S.T.C. "breath[es] an air *like* life."

In "The Garden of Boccacio," the despondency of "Dejection" gives way to a light escape into an engraved world fit for drawing-room display. Yet the poem contains elements of the miniature romantic episodes in which Coleridge often stages his late confessions: (1) S.T.C. witnesses his own public biography rehearsed by personifications in an overtly conventional performance; and (2) this self-conscious rehearsal in turn invites readers to become conscious of their own reliance on the media and mediating literary practices that create and sustain S.T.C.

"Love's Apparition and Evanishment: An Allegoric Romance," which Coleridge composed and published in 1833 for the 1834 *Friendship's Offering*, fully incorporates these features into a confessional mode. "Dejection: an Ode" is again in the background, although this becomes clear only after a lengthy description of "a lone ARAB, old and blind" sitting amidst desert asps—imagery that recalls the exotic eastern settings of nineteenth-century neo-romances

(*Friendship's Offering* p. 355). The blind Arab episode is an analogy for an experience reminiscent of the "Dejection" ode:

Even [as that blind Arab], in vacant mood, one sultry hour,
Resting my eye upon a drooping plant,
With brow low-bent within my Garden bower,
I sate upon the Couch of Camomile. (p. 355)

"Garden bower" adds a Spenserian coloring to the romantic setting. The poem emphasizes the remediation of S.T.C., Coleridge's public image as a despondent dreamer, through the conventions of domesticated romance.

S.T.C. reveals his dependence on conventions when he recounts the trance that then overtook him: "Drest as a bridesmaid, but all pale and cold, / With roseless cheek," "genial HOPE" was spread "lifeless at" his "feet"; her younger sister, "LOVE, a Sylph in bridal trim," came to stand by his "seat," and then "bent, and kissed" HOPE'S "lips"; but it was a soulless kiss, "a chilling breath, / That woke enough of life in death / To make HOPE die anew" (*Friendship's Offering* pp. 355-6). S.T.C. watches passively as the hallucinatory pantomime unfolds around him. The lifelessness of the personified actors—"With roseless cheek, all pale and cold and dim"—is of a particular kind, which John Bowring identifies in an 1830 review discussing Coleridge's juvenile poetry: "[I]t chiefly consists of those cold personifications of qualities [that are like] so many wax-work figures. . . . This automaton manufactory was fashionable when Mr. Coleridge was a reading boy" (*Critical Heritage* 530-1). As Chester F. Chapin has demonstrated, eighteenth-century poets assumed their readers would visualize personifications in their poems by associating them with images from allegorical paintings, pseudo-classical wall decorations, and garden statues (59-65). For Bowring, writing a few years before Coleridge publishes

“Love’s Apparition,” this union of writing and reading practices has become at best quaintly pleasing, able to suggest “a noble group for the sculptor” (*Critical Heritage* 531). LOVE and HOPE might be “pale and cold and dim” because they ask to be imagined as sculpted figures according to a dated custom.

Yet in their venue of publication these marmoreal sisters acquire new charm, since literary annuals breathed life into the fading convention of visualizing personifications, relying on it to sustain comparisons between poems and engravings of statuesque passions. One such engraving provides the basis for a poem by Laetitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L.), “Juliet after the Masquerade” (**Fig. 2: “Juliet after the Masquerade” engraving**). Alluding to statues watching over Juliet in the back of the engraving, L.E.L. laments that “Love” must “watch Hope’s grave, / And yet itself breathe on” (*Literary Souvenir* p. 60). Yet LOVE and HOPE in Coleridge’s “Allegoric Romance” are different from their rhetorical cousins in L.E.L.’s poem. They not only strike allegoric poses (e.g. HOPE lying dead at the speaker’s feet), but move with automatic life, as a statue might if granted “enough of life in death” to animate its limbs but leave its cheeks cold. Of course, the fate of HOPE—“[LOVE’s cold kiss] Woke enough of life in death / To make HOPE die anew”—recalls Coleridge’s most celebrated personification in his most celebrated poem, which had just been republished in 1828 and 1829. I quote from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in *Poetical Works* 1829⁹:

Her lips were red, *her* looks were free,

Her locks were yellow as gold:

Her skin was white as leprosy,

The Night-Mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,

Who thicks man’s blood with cold.

LOVE and HOPE share elements of The Night-Mare LIFE-IN-DEATH: her “lips,” her pale skin, her coldness, her half-living state. But they lack their predecessor’s sublimity, and so also share S.T.C.’s infamous decline from imaginative vision. Their “life-in-death” is sustained by the reading practice—visualization of personifications as figures in sculptures and engravings—that their “cold” movements acknowledge as fashionably artificial.

S.T.C.’s narrative is also transformed into a rehearsal of conventions in “The Pang More Sharp than All: An Allegory” (comp. 1825 and after, pub. in *PW* 1834). The Coleridgean speaker meditates on “the magic Child” (*PW [CC]* 37), identified as “Love” in the poem’s final line (58), who has “flitted from” his heart (1). The Spenserian atmosphere is evident. S.T.C. opens comparing “that bright Boy” to an

Elfin knight in kingly court,
Who having won all guerdons in his sport,
Glides out of view, and whither none can find! (*PW [CC]* 6-8)

He also adapts the antiquated diction and allegorical titles of *The Faerie Queene*: the departed boy “has left behind” a brother and sister, “The one a steady lad (Esteem he hight) / And Kindness is the gentler sister’s name” (26-7). Yet within S.T.C.’s “secret heart” (36), the child Love has caused a “magic image” of himself to “up-grow by his strong art” (38):

As in that crystal* orb—wise Merlin’s feat,—
The wondrous “World of Glass,” wherein inisl’d
All long’d for things their beings did repeat;
And there He left it, like a Sylph beguiled,
To live and yearn and languish incomplete! (38-43)

The footnote identifies “Faerie Queene, B.III.C.2.s.19,” when Britomart glimpses, in Merlin’s crystal globe, Artegall, the lover she is destined to meet. S.T.C., by contrast, will never reunite with the “Child,” who perhaps represents his lost youth when “Love” was present. His confession also “languish[es] incomplete”: the poem conforms to the popular story of S.T.C.’s decline into hallucinatory enervation, but offers no clue about the biographical events mimed by the personified agents. Esteem and Kindness are called Love’s “playmates, twin births of his foster-dame” (25)—but who is this surrogate guardian, and what absent mother has she replaced? The poem closes with the personified performance typical of Coleridge’s late confessions:

[A]t her Brother’s [Esteem’s] hest, the twin-born Maid [Kindness]
With face averted and unsteady eyes,
Her truant playmate’s [Love’s] faded robe puts on;
And inly shrinking from her own disguise
Enacts the faery Boy that’s lost and gone. (52-6)

As Kindness “enacts” lost Love, even she “inly” shrinks from her impersonation, and her fleeting self-awareness makes S.T.C.’s confession seem automated: the personified passions and character qualities act on their own as he passively watches. In the final couplet, however, the personified drama abruptly ends, and the actors fall into flat abstractions: “O worse than all! O pang all pangs above / Is Kindness counterfeiting absent Love!” (57-8). Paley feels that a disparity suddenly emerges at this point between the pantomime and the poet whose life it supposedly represents:

[T]he miming of the ‘faery’ world fails to establish a credible reality,
and prosopopeia fades into abstraction as the poet exclaims, ‘O worse than

all! O pang of pangs above | Is Kindness counterfeiting absent Love!’ The note of acceptance sounded . . . in other late poems such as ‘Duty Surviving Self-Love’ (1826) . . . has at least temporarily given way, after the poet’s encounter with the undesiring object of his desire, to a cry of anguish and despair. (108)

In these lines, an authorial voice intrudes that seems less reconciled than S.T.C. to the miniature drama performed by the personified actors. They now seem marionettes, their strings held by Coleridge, whose obscure biographical story of departed love remains undisclosed, and not by S.T.C., his authorial persona or mask in the poem. The sentimental episode viewed by S.T.C., the poem indicates, is a mannered, public stand-in for the unwritten biography of Coleridge, the removed yet orchestrating poet. In this late confession poem, Coleridge writes according to known literary fashions and reading expectations, including those governing his own public persona. Yet by *presenting* the performance as automatic, he indicates that it reflects his deliberate, veiled intentions as a poet.

In some cases, this quality of the late confession poems—their transformation of S.T.C.’s narrative into a conventional rehearsal that seems deliberately staged by Coleridge—depends upon their typography. In August 1833, Coleridge dispatched a hasty note to Thomas Pringle, editor of the literary annual *Friendship’s Offering*. Apparently, Pringle’s printer had deleted the small capitals worn by LOVE and HOPE in “Love’s Apparition”:

I sadly quarrel with our modern Printers for their levelling spirit of antipathy to all initial Capitals . . . I greatly approve of the German Rule of distinguishing all Noun-Substantives by a Capital: & at least, all

Personifications shall be in small Capitals: see—HOPE [in “Love’s Apparition”]. (Letters 955)

Coleridge’s determination to retain small capitals for LOVE and HOPE is surprising, since in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) he had criticized eighteenth-century use of this printing convention to grant abstractions personhood: the addition or subtraction “of a small Capital” arbitrarily determined whether such figures would be “personifications, or mere abstracts” (*Biographia* I 20). Coleridge’s need to write this letter indicates that near the end of his life editors and printers generally agreed with the aversion he had displayed toward small capitals: such typography is out of date. His nephew and the primary editor of *PW* 1834, Henry Nelson Coleridge (hereafter H.N.C.), demonstrates a similar aversion to small capitals when he labors to make his uncle’s poetry more acceptable to the public. *PW* 1834 deletes nearly all the small capitals—and sometimes even initial capitals—connected to personifications. Such agency-granting typography had been spared in *PW* 1828 and 1829, edited by William Pickering with Coleridge’s closer involvement.

In the introduction to an unsigned promotional review of *PW* 1834 in *The Quarterly Review*, H.N.C. carefully eliminates the small capitals in “Youth and Age” (comp. 1823). He wants to dispel the stigma of S.T.C.’s persona¹⁰ by presenting to the public “the man” himself, “Mr. Coleridge,” who has so impressed associates and visitors with his “living” presence that “they admire the man more than the works.” To “watch the infirmities of” Coleridge’s body “transfigured in the brightness of the awakening spirit” of his conversation is awe-inspiring:

[I]n no other person did we ever witness such . . . alienation of mind from body, such a mastery of the purely intellectual over the purely corporeal, as in the instance of this remarkable man. (*Critical Heritage* 622-3)

To portray Coleridge as a spirit of “intellectual fire” bound in an aged body (622), H.N.C. turns to “Youth and Age,” probably because of the poem’s subject and its wide exposure through literary annuals (*The Literary Souvenir* and *The Bijou* of 1828) and collected editions (*PW* 1828, 1829, 1834). To adapt his uncle’s poem for the “inside look” he wishes to give readers, H.N.C. deletes the small capitals. I quote relevant lines from *PW* 1828 (p. 83) next to H.N.C.’s version:

PW 1828

H.N.C.’s quotation

O YOUTH! for years so many and sweet,
'Tis known, that Thou and I were one,
I'll think it but a fond conceit—
It cannot be, that Thou art gone!
Thy Vesper-bell hath not yet toll'd:—
And thou wert aye a Masker bold!
What strange Disguise hast now put on,
To *make believe*, that thou art gone?
I see these Locks in silvery slips,
This drooping Gait, this altered Size:
But SPRINGTIDE blossoms on thy Lips,
And Tears take sunshine from thine eyes!
Life is but Thought: so think I will
That YOUTH and I are House-mates still.

O youth! for years so many and sweet,
'Tis known that thou and I were one,
I'll think it but a fond conceit—
It cannot be that thou art gone!
Thy vesper bell hath not yet tolled:—
And thou wert aye a masker bold!
What strange disguise hast now put on,
To make believe that thou art gone?
I see these locks in silvery slips,
This drooping gait, this altered size;—
But springtide blossoms on thy lips,
And tears take sunshine from thine eyes!
Life is but thought: so think I will
That Youth and I are house-mates still.

To paint a sentimental, but favorable, personal portrait of the “man” behind S.T.C., H.N.C. downplays the situation of “Youth and Age,” in which the poet’s “intellectual fire” is a poor compensation for (not a triumph over) Yeatsian confinement in the infirmities of the flesh: the “Thought” in the last lines is a conscious delusion. Although misleading, H.N.C.’s presentation of the poem is in sympathy with the hermeneutics that Coleridge modeled through his confessional prose. H.N.C. asks readers to enter the spirit of the old man at Highgate, so they might realize afresh the works the poet left behind by “awaken[ing]” within themselves “the same cast of imagination and fancy” that “animate[s]” his images (*Critical Heritage* 633).

This reading process seems threatened by the quaintness of YOUTH’S small capitals. His typographical body presents him as a fictive agent invoked by convention, which complements his role in the poem as a psychological masquerader—“What strange Disguise hast now put on . . . ?”—whose “Lips,” blossoming with artificial “SPRINGTIDE,” and “eyes,” casting “sunshine” through “Tears,” are S.T.C.’s wistful projections upon the aged visage he encounters in the mirror: “I see these Locks in silvery slips, / . . . But . . . thy Lips / . . . [and] thine eyes!” (*PW* 1828 p. 83). In *The Literary Souvenir*, YOUTH’S outmoded typographical costume was appropriate for S.T.C.’s nostalgic meditation. Sentimentally pleasing as such outdated capitals might be in the context of a literary annual, they are devastating to H.N.C.’s effort to transform S.T.C. into “the living author” “Mr. Coleridge.”

The small capitals draw attention to the mediation of S.T.C.’s confession through conventions of typography and personification. Had H.N.C. quoted earlier sections of the poem, he would doubtless have removed other small capitals, as has been done in *PW* 1834. In these

earlier lines from *PW* 1828, personifications depend almost entirely on typography for their faint agency:

VERSE, a Breeze mid blossoms straying,
Where HOPE clung feeding, like a bee—
Both were mine! Life went a maying
With NATURE, HOPE, and POESY,
When I was young!

.....

FLOWERS are lovely; LOVE is flower-like

FRIENDSHIP is a sheltering tree. . .

(*PW* 1828 p. 82)

H.N.C.'s rejection of the small capitals suggests their artificiality challenges his conviction that one should enter into the feelings of a poet, a notion Coleridge probably shaped (Graham 286-9). Instead of inviting the reader to participate in the painful nostalgia of "Mr. Coleridge," these small capitals testify to Coleridge's conventional rehearsal of his public image—a grey-haired man lost in reverie, forsaken of "YOUTH," "VERSE," "HOPE," and "POESY."

To give this impression, "Youth and Age" and other late confession poems expose the insubstantial agencies of their speakers. The title of "Youth and Age" reminds us that S.T.C. plays a role: "Age." He beholds himself in the mirror as a literary topos, the traditional *senex*-figure: "I see these Locks in silvery slips, / This drooping Gate, this altered Size." When Paley comes to this section of the poem, he remarks, "Coleridge now puts a distance between himself as poet and himself as speaker and subject" (68). S.T.C. becomes a personification of "Age" and the *senex* topos by which he is recognized. In "Love's Apparition" S.T.C. is also insubstantial: he vanishes into the pantomime enacted around his seat when HOPE dies anew at the close. In

“The Pang More Sharp than All,” the curtain lifts, the marionettes fall into lifeless abstractions, and another voice—supposedly that of Coleridge the poet—vents anguish that cannot be contained in the miniature allegory. In the late confession poems, Coleridge increases the distance between the speaker and the poet, between S.T.C. in a particular role (e.g. “Age”) and the shadowy “Coleridge” who has constructed that persona.

This, at least, seems to be the impression made upon H.N.C., who de-capitalizes YOUTH in order to give an intimate account of the life and spirit of “Mr. Coleridge.” Rajan senses the same when she writes that Coleridge’s later poems are part of a “strategy” (242-3); as does Paley when he describes “Love’s Apparition” as “the death” of the poet’s “emotional life” enacted by “a puppet-play of personifications” (111); and J.C.C. Mays when he observes that Coleridge’s “later poems continually hint at, draw upon, even summon into existence an unwritten narrative concerning . . . a blocked emotional situation,” which remains “unwritten because they continually frustrate attempts to translate it into wide awake experience” (98).

One could explain this feature of Coleridge’s late confessions as a technique for screening private emotions from scrutiny or preempting criticism of his poetic decline. It is also possible to read the poems in light of Coleridge’s long concern that writers and readers might become automatons acting out the time-bound dictates of their literary culture, and the doubt eventually cast on his idealized hermeneutics by his biblical criticism and the fate of his public persona in print culture. In this context, Coleridge’s late poems make a particular confession, revoking the ideal of free cooperation between writers and readers sustained by the mediation of their “common Humanity.” Automated literary conventions (e.g., domesticated neo-romantic episodes); quaint reading practices (e.g., visualization of personified agents as statues); printing

customs (e.g., small capitals for personifications); and Coleridge's own public persona—these are the mediums through which the reader engages Coleridge's late poems.

Yet for at least some past and present readers, the conventionality of these poems seems to reflect the intentions of a removed agent, whose surrogate speaker is expendable. The poems might surrender the illusion of voluntary and immediate engagement between author and reader to determining and mediating convention, so as to encourage readers to believe the submission is deliberate. Coleridge's self-defeating poems summon the ghost of a self-determining poet.

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¹ H.J. Jackson and J.R. de J. Jackson discuss the probable dates of composition in their edition of "Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit" in *Shorter Works and Fragments*; hereafter quotes from "Confessions" cited as *Shorter Works*.

² Max F. Shulz, perhaps the first to study the "confession voice" in Coleridge's poetry, includes these three late poems with the others I mention above (131).

³ *Poetical Works*, ed. J.C.C. Mays (2001); hereafter cited *PW (CC)*.

⁴ By 1833, Edward Lytton Bulwer could cite Coleridge's status as a commonplace. "I could trace . . . the revival of our (modern) romantic poetry to an earlier founder than C[oleridge], who is usually considered its parent" (230).

⁵ See no. 419 of *The Spectator*, vol. 3, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 570-573.

⁶ See the introduction to the poem (#111) in *PW (CC)*.

⁷ Sonia Hofkosh notes that the primary appeal of literary annuals was their inclusion of otherwise unaffordable or hard-to-obtain engravings (206).

⁸ Many writers for literary annuals had to invent poems or stories for pre-selected engravings (Hofkosh, 208).

⁹ Hereafter editions of *Poetical Works* other than J.C.C. Mays' (2001) are noted *PW* with year of publication.

¹⁰ H.N.C. recites and aims to correct the conventional story of S.T.C.—“he commonly passes for a man of genius, who has written some very beautiful verses, but whose original powers, whatever they were, have been long since lost or confounded in the pursuit of metaphysic dreams” (*Critical Heritage* 620).