

Coleridge and Wordsworth in *Pandaemonium*

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It is always difficult to know what demands to make of films based on the lives of historical characters with whom one is familiar through their published work and private papers and through the testimony of their contemporaries. If even the most comprehensive of written commentaries are obliged to select and edit, conflate and shape in order to re-present the past to a new generation, how much more exigent is all this adaptive activity for filmmakers with only two hours at their disposal—in the case of director Julien Temple and his *Pandaemonium* (2000), only two hours in which to condense twenty years of the life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his relationship with his intimate friends, the poet William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy? We are unlikely to deplore the omission of images or details of Coleridge's toilet habits, say—though Coleridge as a life long sufferer of stomach and bowel ailments exacerbated by his opium addiction expended an enormous emotional and imaginative energy on the state of his own bodily motions and sensations. We are, however, likely to feel indignant if what we take to be more significant characteristics or incidents are overlooked or distorted.

The celebrated chemist Humphry Davy, for example, was not part of a radical cell in 1795 launching Jacobinical (left-wing) literature from helium balloons outside Bristol—the slave-trading city that is the setting of the opening sequence of flashbacks in the film.¹ Davy was only seventeen and wouldn't be at the Pneumatic Institute in Bristol until three years later. And he certainly never shared a room with radical writer and lecturer John Thelwall, who in turn was never a printer. (Thelwall in the film takes over some of the role that bookseller and publisher Joseph Cottle played in the early lives of Coleridge and Robert Southey; both Cottle and Southey have effectively been edited out of the account here.) Indeed, neither Davy nor Thelwall was in Bristol during Coleridge's short-lived career there as a left-wing lecturer (not street orator) in 1795-6. Nor did Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy help Coleridge escape from the red-coats after he had delivered an inflammatory

speech. There was no such speech (and if there had been, it would have been a good deal more eloquent than the one in the film).

There is, however, enough truth in these opening episodes of Coleridge's adult life-episodes, it should also be said, that have some of the hallmarks of the kind of condensation and displacement one might expect of a dream sequence—to justify at least some of the exaggerations and distortions they involve. Humphry Davy was indeed briefly associated with radical Dissenting intellectuals later in the decade, for example, and certainly did experiment with laughing gas (as the film suggests), even if he didn't help launch Coleridge's periodical *The Watchman* from the sky. Wordsworth did meet Coleridge very briefly in Bristol and their work was known to each other before the two became neighbours in 1797. Moreover, since Nicholas Roe's authoritative recreation of this decade in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*, we have been more mindful of the notoriety of John Thelwall and of his importance in the political life of the nation and the personal lives of the Coleridges.²

So the facts can be bent into more or less acceptable, more or less pleasing shapes. The choice of actors to play the main characters in historical dramas is usually the first litmus test for those familiar with the visual and verbal records. For the informed viewer, a wildly inappropriate choice will always block credibility, however willing they might be to suspend their disbelief. This is not one of those occasions on which it really matters. The worst that can be said of the cast of *Pandaemonium* is that they are too beautiful. Coleridge's teeth were bad, for example,³ and he hated his small and indistinct nose, just as he hated the irresolution he detected in the lower half of his face. Being unable to breathe out of his nose, said Coleridge, meant that his mouth hung open stupidly.⁴ The essayist William Hazlitt took up the theme from Coleridge himself in repeated public attacks on the anti-climax of Coleridge's career: 'his nose, the rudder of the face, the index of the will, was small, feeble, nothing-like what he has done'.⁵

My own reservations about the cast stem less from my knowledge of contemporary portraits in pen and oil than from my knowledge of Ken Russell's two-part *Clouds of Glory* for British independent Granada

Television in 1978-another 'biopic' depicting the lives of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Though a good deal more restrained than Russell's characteristic work (see his treatment of Byron and the Shelleys in *Gothic*⁶), I recall one hallucinatory sequence in which the opiated Coleridge impales his estranged wife Sara with an anchor in a fit of wishful thinking. That aside, what most impressed me about Russell's telefilm was its casting. The tall and physically angular David Warner was an inspired choice for Wordsworth, a better choice surely than the shorter, more elegant John Hannah of *Pandaemonium*, struggling unsuccessfully to convert a Scottish into a Cumberland accent. And Russell's choice of David Hemmings as Coleridge had the virtue of looking more dissipated-heavier, less healthy, pastier-than *Pandaemonium's* Linus Roache. (In an unwashed period, Coleridge was renowned for being grubbier than most.⁷)

But Linus Roache's rather too attractive Coleridge is easy enough to forgive-rather as some of the better known contemporary portraits, like Vandyke's,⁸ can be forgiven for romanticizing the young Coleridge. We're reconciled to Hollywood's cult of beauty and Linus Roache captures some of the stupefaction of the lower part of the poet's face in the erratic and uncertain glee that occasionally comes over him, especially in the company of Dorothy.

We can also forgive the film's fascination with Coleridge's opium addiction and its reductive attempts to explain an unprecedented and still strikingly original body of 'supernatural' poems by reference to their author's use of drugs.⁹ The same fascination informed the popular revival of interest in Coleridge and his Xanadu back in the 1960s and 70s (represented in the soundtrack of the film's closing credits). Here, however, the constraints are as much artistic as they are fashionable, and testify at once to the strengths and limits of the medium. From the eerie, languid unfolding of the drops of laudanum (opium dissolved in alcohol) in a crystal glass of water in the opening shot, where the camera-as it so often does throughout the film-lingers over visual details with the rapt attention of an opium addict, the film takes over the sensuality and sensationalism of the opium dream. For screenwriter Frank Cottrell Bryce, opium is the single most significant influence on Coleridge's poetry. It is certainly true that Coleridge's own

notebooks are full of such acts of minute attention and focussed meditation and that opium dominated his adult life from the age of twenty-eight. On the list of Coleridge's defining characteristics, his drug-taking ranks with his 'metaphysics', his plagiarism, and his mesmerizing eloquence.

However, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was written well before he was under the heavy influence of drugs, when he was only a very occasional, if enthusiastic, user.¹⁰ What the film cannot reproduce and makes no attempt to record is the prodigious extent of Coleridge's reading—arguably, the defining characteristic of the man. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is not the product of drugs (its most sensational and memorable incident, the shooting of the albatross, came from Wordsworth) but rather of a wealth of both 'official' and arcane travel literature and of fantastic folk or fairy tale, each genre vying with the other as a fund of the fantastic. John Livingston Lowes' attempts back in the late 1920s in his *The Road to Xanadu* to track the poem through Coleridge's vast reading remains a standing tribute, and since that time each generation has only added to the library of the poem's sources.¹¹ This is somewhere the film cannot and will not go.

Time and the medium, in other words, demand the radical editing and conflation of a subject as unwieldy as twenty years in the adult life of a remarkable man, and the lives of his friends and lovers. The question becomes one of just how much manipulation and misrepresentation we are prepared to tolerate. Some of the more flagrant of these misrepresentations will be seen as either inspired or simply 'idle and extravagant',¹² depending on the viewer's knowledge and point of view. The new symbolic role assigned by the film to the government agent, James Walsh, is a case in point. Walsh spent a week or two stalking the 'disaffected Englishmen' (as he called them¹³) around Nether Stowey and Alfoxden during Wordsworth's and Coleridge's first creative retreat together, and the agent's prominent nose has given his brief intervention in their lives a corresponding prominence. (In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge talks of their having been overheard by Walsh discussing the philosopher Spinoza, which Walsh was said to have misheard as 'spy nosey', a reference to himself.¹⁴) In the film, James Walsh becomes the sinister embodiment of an illiberal and oppressive establishment—a Satanic figure who haunts the poets over two decades and to whom

Wordsworth sells his soul for material comfort and the poet laureateship (though, as in reality, the laureateship goes to the more aggressively place-seeking apostate Southey instead).

Again, in an altogether different kind of conflation, the two generations of Romantic poets become one in the film and young Coleridge ends up looking and sounding remarkably like the young Percy Bysshe Shelley. Shelley was an altogether more outspoken radical who really did disseminate his ideas through balloon drops like the one in the film, as well as in bottles cast into the ocean. Both generations of the Romantics were fascinated by fire and electricity and debated the existence and nature of a 'vital principle', and Coleridge seems voluntarily to have undergone electric shocks during one of Humphry Davy's chemistry lectures at the Royal Institution in early 1802.¹⁵ It was Shelley, however, who participated in the kind of melodramatic experiment featured in the film-when he wasn't administering electric shocks to the unwitting through the door handle of his room at University College, Oxford.¹⁶ At one stage the film seemed to be offering yet another imaginative genealogy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In a similar way, the radical mob scene in Bristol in the film-a far cry from the middle-class, pro Liberty, anti-slave trading radicalism of late eighteenth-century Dissent-fuses London riots of the mid 1790s with the grass roots reform agitation of Peterloo and the 1820s.

To these wilful misreadings may be added Julien Temple's provocative anachronisms. Abandoning even the pretence at historical accuracy, pleasure domes metamorphose into nuclear power reactors and, as Davy's air balloon ascends towards a clear late eighteenth-century heaven carrying the promise of a reformed world, the sky is seen to be scarred by the jet stream of a twenty-first-century fighter plane. All of this can be read as a more or less ingenious way of talking about the human imagination and the role of creativity in the early nineteenth century and beyond. Temple takes up Coleridge's meditation in 'Kubla Khan' and elsewhere on the fine line between creative and destructive genius, as the Mongol emperor Kubla Khan becomes an archetype of what Coleridge called 'commanding genius'-Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin-whose attempts to reduce the world to utopian order modulate into extreme forms of inhumanity and violence.¹⁷ The world

garden decreed rather than conjured by the dictator echoes with 'ancestral voices prophesying war!' ('Kubla Khan', l. 30).

Accurate, then, the film is not-not remotely. On the other hand, whether it can be said otherwise to keep faith with the poets themselves, or with what they represented to their own and to subsequent generations, is another question. But one aspect of the film's determination to play fast and loose with the historical record seems to me to be indefensible, and that is its quite vicious demonization of William and Mary Wordsworth.¹⁸

Wordsworth did not abandon Coleridge for the Lakes district because, intimidated by Coleridge's drug-induced creativity, he had written next to nothing during the years of their closest friendship. (In fact, he didn't abandon Coleridge at all-the two actually embarked on a trip to Germany with Wordsworth's sister Dorothy, but that's another story.) In the film, Wordsworth's creative efforts during the period of their intimacy are confined to a short hymn to Dorothy, part of his *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* (a piece whose beauty, incidentally, is entirely glossed over in the film, where it is designed to seduce Dorothy away from the more talented and exotic Coleridge). On the contrary, during the years 1797 and 1798 Wordsworth wrote some of his best poetry-including *The Ruined Cottage*, *The Pedlar*, and 'The Discharged Soldier', as well as all his contributions to the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. But there is no indication in the film that Wordsworth had any talent whatever.

All of this is, if nothing else, an insult to Coleridge himself, to the admiration he bore Wordsworth and to his critical conviction that Wordsworth was or would be the greatest poet of the age. And it radically underestimates just how enabling *for both poets* Coleridge's admiration of and support for Wordsworth really was. The long poem begun in Germany in late 1798 and posthumously entitled *The Prelude*-the poem we now regard as Wordsworth's major work-was known for most of its early life as the 'poem for Coleridge' and 'the poem on the Growth of my Mind' (telling alternatives, surely). Coleridge is invoked throughout, not with envy, but with gratitude and with love.¹⁹

Many critics have found Coleridge's adulation of the older and more upright Wordsworth unjustified, if (knowing Coleridge) understandable. (As the film's Robert Southey says: 'Sam, opium is not your worst addiction. Your worst addiction is to Wordsworth'.) Wordsworth could indeed be unpleasant and arrogant, becoming narrowly conservative in old age and equally narrow in his tastes. (The omnivorous Coleridge, catholic in his reading *and* his relish, was unquestionably the more generous critic.) It was, moreover, true enough that Wordsworth did not appreciate Coleridge's supernatural poems and demoted *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to the back of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. The patriarchal older Wordsworth, a cosseted hypochondriac at the centre of a household of adoring women, has been an easy whipping boy for the new, sceptical Romanticism of the last twenty-five years, with its instinctive distrust of what Keats called 'the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime' and its determination to prefer the interests of Wordsworth's sister Dorothy.²⁰ But it is a long way from here to the infantile, petulant, envious, sycophantic, and (as I said) talentless Wordsworth of Julien Temple's and Frank Cottrell Bryce's imagining.

So it is with Mary Wordsworth (née Hutchinson), Wordsworth's wife. In *Pandaemonium*, when Wordsworth hears the call home to the Lakes district, an infatuated Dorothy returns with him only to confront the sour-faced Mary Hutchinson at the door of Dove Cottage. Mary appears out of nowhere to disrupt the family idyll created and encouraged by William to seduce his sister back from Coleridge. There is no indication that Mary had been a family friend since she and William had been at dame-school together, as well as a regular correspondent of Dorothy herself. Nor is there any indication that, before the announcement of William's marriage to Mary, William and Dorothy had spent six months at the Hutchinson family farm at Sockburn-on-Tees. The marriage was indeed painful for Dorothy, and Mary did displace her in her brother's affections, but Mary was not the pinched, prim, possessive, sexless vixen of the film, collaborating with her affectionless helpmeet, the diabolical Wordsworth, to exclude Dorothy and drive her into opium addiction on the Coleridgean precedent (arguably the most irresponsible excursion into fantasy in the whole film) and, subsequently, into insanity. Far from being heartless co-conspirators in an historical plot to destroy everyone else

and promote Wordsworth's exaltation to rank and reputation, William and Mary Wordsworth actually enjoyed an emotionally and sexually passionate marriage and a healthy relationship with a wide network of close friends. And Dorothy remained an important part of the household. Dorothy did eventually go insane-tended lovingly by her brother, incidentally-but the onset of her insanity the film dates twenty-two years before it actually occurred after a severe physical illness, not after overdosing on opium.

For the literary scholar, however, the film has two redeeming features that go a long way towards compensating for some unforgivable (defamatory) distortions: its love of Coleridge and its love of Coleridge's poetry. For Coleridge was indeed a loveable character-bugger him. At least, this is how friends like Charles Lamb saw him, the friends whom he alternately enchanted and infuriated: 'The rogue gives you Love Powders, and then a strong horse drench to bring 'em off your stomach that they mayn't hurt you'.²¹ For Lamb, the poetry, too, came with love powders:

He is at present under the medical care of a Mr Gilman (Killman?) a Highgate Apothecary, where he plays at leaving off Laud[anu]m.-I think his essentials not touched, he is very bad, but then he wonderfully picks up another day, and his face when he repeats his verses hath its ancient glory, an Arch angel a little damaged. . . . [he recited 'Kubla Khan'] so enchantingly that it irradiates & brings heaven & Elysian bowers into my parlour while he sings or says it.²²

Lamb would never have approved of the film's travesty of Wordsworth, remaining as he did a friend to both of the poets, even after the two had fallen out in 1810 never to recover their former affection. But Lamb fought Wordsworth more stubbornly and eloquently than any of Coleridge's friends over the unique brilliance of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.²³

As with Lamb, so with Julien Temple and Frank Cottrell Bryce. Unlike the vast majority of biopics about writers, *Pandaemonium* makes poetry and the creative process the centre of its interest. To this extent, then, in spite of its distortions and prejudices, the film keeps faith with its subject. Coleridge

is still one of the greatest and certainly one of the most influential thinkers on the provenance and significance of human creativity. And when Coleridge wrote on creativity he wrote with all the wisdom of hindsight, unable as he was to revive 'the symphony and song' of those brief years when he and Wordsworth enjoyed one of the most remarkably creative friendships in English literary history.

This is what the film has picked up on. There was and there remains something inexplicable, even faintly miraculous about 'Kubla Khan', *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the unfinished *Christabel*-something for which material and literary history, Coleridge's experience, and (*pace* Temple) opium can only partly account. Something for which even Coleridge's vast reading cannot account. Coleridge was for his own generation and remains for ours the archetypal romantic poet-a conjurer of the exotic and the fantastic-and the archetypal Romantic poet: the possessor, celebrant, and victim of an exalted but elusive imaginative power. The prominence and respect given to 'Frost at Midnight', *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and 'Kubla Khan' by this film are refreshing, as it unapologetically celebrates not only Coleridge's poetry, but also poetry itself-poetry as a cultural activity that (to quote Coleridge) 'brings the whole soul of man into activity'.²⁴ The one thing that films about writers can rarely do is linger too long over gestation and composition-ironically the activities for which their subjects are most memorable. The creative journeys that lead to the poems in *Pandaemonium*, while sometimes fantastic in themselves-how could they not be?-and sometimes just silly or psychologically simplistic, still are re-enacted at some length and never wittingly or unwittingly trivialized. And some of the voice-over readings evolve so inevitably and evocatively out of the drama that Coleridge (if he could ever have approved of the cinema) would have praised them as 'organic'-as distinct, that is, from the often awkward, 'mechanic' relation obtaining in film between the cinematic and the literary text.²⁵ I wonder if I was the only member of the audience (of four!) in the cinema on the day I saw the film who, in spite of a comparatively generous serving of Coleridge's poetry, yearned for yet more-who wished that they had extended their reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to include all of this or that part, for example, and had read 'Frost at Midnight' and 'Kubla Khan' from beginning to end instead of chopping them up and spreading

passages around in the way that they did. And why not the *Ode on Dejection* and 'The Pains of Sleep'? Or read 'The Nightingale' instead of pinching its initiating incident of baby Hartley's tears for the (admittedly exquisite) 'Frost at Midnight' sequence? If (like Coleridge) the film is guilty of romanticizing creativity and of exaggerating its cultural significance, it is at least a refreshing antidote to the indifference to writing of most films about writers.

FILMOGRAPHY

Pandaemonium (2000)

Director: Julien Temple

Writer: Frank Cottrell Bryce

A BBC film *starring*

Linus Roache

John Hannah

Samantha Morton

Emily Woof

Emma Fielding

Andy Serkis

Samuel West

Michael N. Harbour

Dexter Fletcher

Samuel Coleridge

William Wordsworth

Sara Coleridge

Dorothy Wordsworth

Mary Wordsworth

John Thelwall

Robert Southey

[James Walsh]

Humphry Davy

Notes

- 1 For details of Coleridge's life and of the period more generally see Richard Holmes's two volumes of biography, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989) and *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London: HarperCollins, 1998); Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1968); Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); and Iain McCalman (gen. ed.), *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 2 Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

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- 3 See Dorothy Wordsworth to Mary Hutchinson, [June 1797], in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, Volume I, *The Early Years 1787-1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, second edition, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), p. 189.
- 4 See Coleridge's letter to John Thelwell, 19 November 1796, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956-1971), I, 259-60.
- 5 My First Acquaintance with Poets', in *Hazlitt: Selected Writings*, ed. Jon Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 214.
- 6 *Gothic* (1986), dir. Ken Russell, screenplay Stephen Volk, starring Gabriel Byrne, Julian Sands, Natasha Richardson, et al.
- 7 See, for example, Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 69.
- 8 Peter Vandyke's oil painting *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1795) hangs in The National Portrait Gallery in London.
- 9 It was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so far as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith', *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), II, 6.
- 10 There is a famous letter to his brother George, [circa 10 March 1798], in which Coleridge talks of escaping a severe toothache: 'Laudanum gave me repose, not sleep: but YOU, I believe, know how divine that repose is-what a spot of enchantment, a green spot of fountains, & flowers & trees, in the very heart of a waste of Sands', *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, I, 394.
- 11 John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study of the Ways of the Imagination* (London: Constable, 1927 [rev. 1951]).
- 12 Compare Wordsworth on the 'frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse' driving the 'invaluable works of our elder writers' into neglect, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), I, 128.
- 13 In his report to John King at the Home Office (HO 42/41); see the account in

- Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*, esp. p. 258.
- 14 *Biographia Literaria*, I, 193-4.
- 15 Davy at the Lectures. Jan. 28, 1802 'I gave a spark with the electric machine- I felt nothing', in *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Vol. 1 1794-1804 (New York: Bollingen, 1957), note 1099.
- 16 For Shelley's early career, including his experiments with electricity and the eccentric dissemination of his writings, see Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974), specifically, pp. 17 and ff., 44-45, 149-50.
- 17 *Biographia Literaria*, I, 31-2.
- 18 For recent accounts of the lives of the Wordsworth circle, see Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy* (New York and London: Norton, 1998); Juliet Barker, *Wordsworth: A Life* (London and New York: Viking, 2000).
- 19 See the various 'References to *The Prelude* in Process: 1799-1850' in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London: Norton, 1979), pp. 529-40.
- 20 The wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone'; see Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, in *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 157.
- 21 In a letter to Wordsworth, 23 September 1816, in *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marr Jr, in 3 vols (Ithaca, New York, and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), III, 225.
- 22 Lamb to Wordsworth, 26 April 1816, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, III, 215.
- 23 See Lamb's letter to Wordsworth, 30 January 1801, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, I, 266.
- 24 *Biographia Literaria*, II, 15-6.
- 25 'The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material . . . The organic form on the other hand is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within', a notebook entry of 1812 derived from August Wilhelm Schlegel; see *Biographia Literaria*, II, 84n.