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## Lake Methodism

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## Chapter 4

# Sage or Sibyl?

## A Lay Sermon

The Regency judged the *Lay Sermons* by their covers, or, at least, their titles, and I'd like to read this superficiality as the texture of "Coleridge" for much of the nineteenth century. We've come to know the depths of both *Sermons* well enough—so well, I think, that we've come to mistake what matters most about them. Containing some of Coleridge's most arcane thoughts on continental philosophy, Trinitarian Christianity, conservative politics, and the ultimate identity of all three when each is properly conceived, the *Lay Sermons*, and *The Statesman's Manual* especially, borrow much of their modern reputation from the seminal work on symbol, allegory, and ideology they've provoked.<sup>1</sup> The consolidated reception of the keynote passages is as sophisticated as, and often more systematic than, the *Sermons* themselves, which may be most familiar now through the unrepresentative (and stabilizing) extracts in popu-

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1. For example, Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187–228; Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, 1–14; Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, 63–99.

lar anthologies. Both *Sermons* can be self-defeatingly crabbed, and neither quite lives up to the devoted praise of their editor as “models of rigorous thinking and penetrating analysis.”<sup>2</sup> But in spite—and often because—of their argumentative difficulty, the *Sermons* arrest close attention.

In this, they preserve the drama of their initial appearance. Published in late 1816 and early 1817, before the *Biographia*, *Sibylline Leaves*, and *The Friend* had been able to stagger into print or reprint, the *Lay Sermons* were Coleridge’s debut as the Sage of Highgate. The role had a long run, albeit to mixed reviews. In 1853, the American W. G. T. Shedd confidently hawked the Sage of the *Sermons* as a metaphysical cure-all, a pool of “deep and brooding reflection,” whose water had “stimulated and strengthened” the admittedly “lesser number” able to peer into its profundity.<sup>3</sup> Two years earlier, Carlyle—with less genial quackery—recalled Coleridge as the font of “speculations,” which had “a charm almost religious and prophetic . . . to the ardent young mind, instinct with pious nobleness, yet driven to the grim deserts of Radicalism for a faith.”<sup>4</sup> For the earliest Coleridgeans, these two slim *Sermons* formed the core of their Master’s teachings. Shedd wagered the success of his *Complete Works of Coleridge* on the appeal of a lead volume consisting of *The Statesman’s Manual* and *Aids to Reflection*, rather than crowd-pleasing “Rimes,” and poetry would play a diminished role in this trans-Atlantic rehabilitation. In 1839, Henry Nelson Coleridge brought his uncle and father-in-law to the “ingenuous but less experienced reader,” with a My-First-Coleridge edition of the *Lay Sermons* and *On the Constitution of Church and State*, his editorial apparatus translating the “fundamental and more complicated portion of the work.”<sup>5</sup>

This alignment of the “fundamental” with the “more complicated” would spin as the axis of Coleridge studies long after the nineteenth century. The gnomic obscurity of the *Lay Sermons* only made “Coleridge” more plausible as “the personification of religious wisdom.”<sup>6</sup> This is Tim

2. *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), xxx. Hereafter cited in-text as *LS*.

3. W. G. T. Shedd, “Introductory Essay upon His Philosophical and Theological Opinions,” in *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Professor Shedd, 7 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1853), 1:9–62 (25, 9).

4. Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling*, 2nd ed. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1852 [1851]), 75.

5. Henry Nelson Coleridge, “Preface to the Church and State,” in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *I. On the Constitution of the Church and State, According to the Idea of Each; II. Lay Sermons*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge (London: William Pickering, 1839), ix–xxix (xi).

6. Tim Fulford, *Coleridge’s Figurative Language* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991), 130.

Fulford's trope—but such personification wasn't entirely figural. Though much of Coleridge is “riddled with a certain ventriloquism of the divine,” it's the first *Lay Sermon*, writes Ian Balfour, “that most resolutely,” and most earnestly, “adopts a prophetic stance.”<sup>7</sup> But this “prophetic stance,” while imposing, could shift on its self-sanctified ground. Coleridge, visionary Father of philosophy and philosophic men, could take on the visage of an unlettered yokel turned preacher, or even that of a bloated village wise-woman berating her betters, and this chapter reveals Coleridge's unsteady efforts to harness these socio-sexual tensions as novel sources of cultural energy in the *Lay Sermons*.

“Lay Sermon,” I'll argue, names the unlikely transfer between oracular utterance and plebeian presumption that—for a time, anyway—constituted Coleridge's reputation. After the normalizations of two centuries of scholarship, we've lost sight of the calculated offensiveness of the *Sermons*, the provocations to good taste and good sense that shaped their historical meaning, and entirely determined their initial reception. The “Sage” has visibly endured, but in the Regency, his heroics depended—or at least played—on the disastrous enthusiasms of the “Sibyl,” Joanna Southcott, and the Methodistical zeal of “lay sermons.” The consequence was not just incoherent, but something like a theory of incoherence, as the *Lay Sermons* continually wrecked their own authority in disreputable spiritualisms, while cobbling together an unexpected vitality from this demolition. The *Sermons* were a game of give-and-take between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, Tory and Methodist, Sage and Sibyl—a game they played without ever fully mastering the rules, as their revisions between 1816 and 1839 would concede.

My story runs against one of Coleridge's own. *The Statesman's Manual*, after all, made an emphatic case for “the *distinctness* of our knowledge,” and such “*distinctness*” was usually never clearer than in Coleridge's work on “enthusiasm” (*LS* 23). “Enthusiasm” was subjected to one of his most sustained desynonymizations, as the second chapter of the *Biographia*, the “Author's Appendix” concluding *On the Constitution of Church and State*, and several important marginal glosses partitioned benevolent psychosocial elevation from its miserable double, “fanaticism.”<sup>8</sup> But Coleridge's distinctions weren't always so neat in the

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7. Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 250–51.

8. The marginalia to Walter Birch, *Sermon on the Prevalence of Infidelity and Enthusiasm* [1818], contains a major reflection on that “practice of all scientific men, whether naturalists or metaphysicians, and the dictate of common sense, that one word ought to

*Lay Sermons*, as the unequivocal Methodism of their titles kept any argument for difference under the sign of stubborn identification. Both *Sermons* were thoroughly conflicted: they preached reactionary politics and sociocultural purity in a form that was the by-word for sedition, heterodoxy induced by ignorance, and an enthusiasm undermining the last decencies of the public sphere. They presented the most acute symptom of the very cultural pathology they diagnosed, screeds against “a popular philosophy and a philosophic populace” that named themselves after one of the most outrageous examples of plebified discourse in the history of English Protestantism (*LS* 38).

This ideological and formal contradiction is the most salient, and the least critically reported, attribute of the *Sermons*. Coleridge himself quickly came to regret it, admitting to John Murray in 1817 that “Lay-sermon” was a “most unfortunate name.”<sup>9</sup> He was even more apologetic with Dr. Brabant a few months earlier, evading generic identity, as well as the definite article: “I attempted to dictate a something that is coming out; what you will think of it, I cannot conjecture.”<sup>10</sup> But conjectural indeterminacy was both abject excuse and organizing principle for the *Lay Sermons*. The *Sermons* finally argued for the power to cancel argument: for the genuinely mysterious authority of statements that mean the opposite of what they say, and of authors who are the opposite of who they claim to be. They attempted to figure a writing so flexible it might bend enthusiasm into order, while contemplating the anarchies within the principles of cultural organization. As we’ll see, the *Sermons* wore their contradictions on their front pages, with tag-lines—“the Bible the Best Guide,” and “Blessed are ye”—that cryptically touched on keywords dear to ultraconservatives as well as prophetic revolutionaries.

These gymnastics don’t make the *Lay Sermons* less reactionary, or more radical, than they’re usually assumed to be. Their conservative *bona fides* are substantial, and they rarely do more than flirt with subversion. But they are scrambled in argument and effect, and their weird extrem-

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have but one meaning” (*Marginalia* 1:495). Jon Mee identifies the desynonymization of “enthusiasm” as the analytical register for social control and political differentiation in Coleridge: “[t]o keep its value, inspiration for Coleridge had to be properly regulated. By the end of his life . . . he had come to believe only the institutional authority of the Church could provide the security he sought from the vicissitudes of the ‘low-born mind.’ . . . The reliance on institutional authority as a restraint on the excess of enthusiasm is the classic Anglican position in the discourse on regulation” (*Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, 135–36).

9. 27 February 1817, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 4:706.

10. 21 September 1816, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 4:673.

ism is bound up in weirder enthusiasm. The result is an intellectual recalcitrance that refuses nice summary. Both texts perform a certain style of writing, reading, and ruling, without quite making a case for coherent philosophical principles or reliable conclusions, and the life and afterlife of this style is my real subject. The *Lay Sermons* are political and rhetorical oxymorons, daring the conflation of refinement with vulgarity, recondite wisdom with senseless jargon, plebeian with clerical culture—and they darkly hint that the negative capability of this daring, rather than the practice of nuanced division, is the best evidence of a supple mind and subtle society.

## Sage

Coleridge's middle-aged orthodoxy can seem absolute. The "Sage" is evangelical only in that he has a palpable design upon us, and patriarchal benevolence doesn't fully soften his cultural and political authoritarianism. This gregarious aggression still manages most readings of the *Sermons*—Coleridge, in fact, thought of a "Lay Sermon" as the formalization of managed reading. "Appendix A" of *The Statesman's Manual* "pre-suppose[d] on the part of the reader or hearer, a humble and docile state of mind," repositioning the potential critique of the anonymous "reader" as the intimate submission of the amiable "hearer," moving deracinated text into the immediacy of conversation (*LS* 55). Yet as Coleridge marginalized in Southey's copy of the second *Lay Sermon*, this audience—fit because few—could be a mirage: "From how few dare a Writer hope for the trouble of reading a page aloud, distinctly, and to their own ears and understandings!" (*LS* 139n1). If the communion between the "Writer" and those "few" on the "page aloud" was slow to materialize, the proselytized often chalked it up to the narcissistic echo of the voice and the voiced text, both more interested in deference than participation, in the capitalized dominance of "Writer" over "reader or hearer," Preacher over "ears and understandings." Even the camelion poet had trouble changing his colors fast enough to match the mercurial shifts of a man supposedly without negative capability.<sup>11</sup> Coleridge's "talk," grouched Carlyle,

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11. As Keats wrote to George and Georgiana Keats, "I took a Walk towards highgate and in the lane that winds by the side of Lord Mansfield's park I met Mr Green our Demonstrator at Guy's in conversation with Coleridge—I joined them, after enquiring by a look whether it would be agreeable—I walked with him a[t] his alderman-after dinner pace for near two miles I suppose In those two Miles he broached a thousand things—let me see

was “always, virtually or literally, of the nature of a monologue; suffering no interruption, however reverent. . . . To sit as a passive bucket and be pumped into, whether you consent or not, can in the long-run be exhilarating to no creature; how eloquent soever the flood of utterance that is descending.”<sup>12</sup>

Drenched by this flood, Coleridge’s disciples came to treat his droughts as particularly fertile, refreshed by those moments when his arguments dammed themselves up altogether. The Sage “embarrassed or irritated” even (and especially) those who have loved him, writes Jerome Christensen.<sup>13</sup> But for those whose affection became a kind of worship, who received the scattering of his writing as a sacramental “blessedness,” Coleridge’s worst was his best, incarnate in those half-finished, sometimes barely begun “jointless sentences” of hints, regrets, and apprehensions offered up in the middle of *On the Constitution of Church and State* in order to “excite a certain class of readers to desire or to supply the commentary.”<sup>14</sup> While the steadfast Gillman confessed “I desire but cannot supply it” (CCS 58n1), for the “certain class,” the blindness of the Sage brought on the insight of his initiates. Soon after his death, “Coleridge” summoned a club of meaning, a collaborative alternative to the alienated exchange of ideas in commodified print.

When Henry Nelson Coleridge conceded in *On the Constitution of Church and State* and the *Lay Sermons* “a want of detailed illustration and express connexion, which weakens the impression of the entire work on the generality of readers,” he meant to train those outside the “generality” to understand this as strength rather than defect.<sup>15</sup> This, he assured a wary audience, was the obscure sublimity of his uncle’s mental syntax, which stimulated the recipient to correct, extend, and sometimes entirely intuit arguments that appeared only in sociable interaction. This autho-

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if I can give you a list—Nightingales, Poetry—on Poetical Sensation—Metaphysics—Different genera and species of Dreams—Nightmare—a dream accompanied with by a sense of touch—single and double touch—A dream related—First and second consciousness—the difference explained between will and Volition—so my [many] metaphysicians from a want of smoking the second consciousness—Monsters—the Kraken—Mermaids—Southey believes in them—Southey’s belief too much diluted—A Ghost story—Good morning—I heard his voice as he came towards me—I heard it as he moved away—I had heard it all the interval—if it may be called so.” Letter 14 Feb–3 May 1819, in *John Keats: A Longman Cultural Edition*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), 245.

12. Carlyle, *Life of Sterling*, 72.

13. Jerome Christensen, *Coleridge’s Blessed Machine of Language*, 120.

14. *On the Constitution of Church and State*, ed. John Colmer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 58. Hereafter cited in-text as CCS.

15. Henry Nelson Coleridge, “Preface to the Church and State,” ix.

rial “want” should be the desideratum of the knowing reader, a lack preventing him—and the reader is determinately gendered—from sliding into mere consumer.<sup>16</sup> In the spirit of Coleridgean cooperation, Henry Nelson Coleridge took F. D. Maurice’s evaluation of *On the Constitution of Church and State* as his own:

When I use the word satisfactory, I do not mean that it will satisfy the wishes of any person . . . who expects an author to furnish him with a complete system which he can carry away in his memory, and, after it has received a few improvements from himself, can hawk it about to the public or to a set of admiring disciples. Men of this description would regard Mr. Coleridge’s book as disorderly and fragmentary; but those who have some notion of what Butler meant when he said, that the best writer would be he who merely stated his premises, and left his readers to work out the conclusions for themselves;—those who feel that they want just the assistance which Socrates offered to his scholars—assistance, not in providing them with thoughts, but in bringing forth into the light thoughts which they had within them before; these will acknowledge that Mr. Coleridge has only deserted the common high way of exposition, that he might follow more closely the turnings and windings which the mind of an earnest thinker makes when it is groping after the truth to which he wishes to conduct it. To them, therefore, the book is satisfactory by reason of those very qualities which make it alike unpleasant to the formal schoolman and to the man of the world.<sup>17</sup>

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16. Even with the dedicated editorial and critical efforts of his daughter, those who valued Coleridge’s philosophy later in the nineteenth century most often valued it as a technology for raising young men up into a masculinized maturity. But Coleridge, argues Anthony John Harding, tended to represent a crisis of masculine collapse for everyone not won over by his persona as Sage/Father; see Harding, “Gendering the Poet-Philosopher: Victorian ‘Manliness’ and Coleridgean ‘Androgyny,’” in *Coleridge’s Afterlives*, ed. James Vigus and Jane Wright (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 65–84. Certainly William Mitchell, one of his most motivated opponents in mid-century America, suggested that Coleridge’s only parallel with Socrates was predatory, an addiction to corrupting the Youth with an adolescently queer metaphysics, which should be rejected in the name of a bluff, commonsensical masculinity and unpretentiously orthodox Christianity: “This definition of an idea, making darkness more dark, with all that is said about supersensuous faculties, provokes a complacent laugh as we hear the master and his beardless disciples (for few men of sober age are caught in such a web of mysticism) chafe at our ignorance of his impenetrable system of ethics, and our incapacity to understand it; but really such philosophy, despite our utmost charity, seems to us to be a compound, in Alligation Alternate, of nothingness, mist, and a few grains of truth; and the more we ask for light, the more are we involved in obscurity” [William Mitchell], *Coleridge and the Moral Tendency of his Writings* (New York: Levitt and Trow, 1844), 35.

17. Maurice, *Kingdom of Christ* (1838), in Henry Nelson Coleridge, “Preface to the



For Professor Shedd, this joint activity meant that reading Coleridge was, inevitably, editing him: “the philosophy of Coleridge must be *gathered* from his writings rather than *quoted* from them, and hence the difficulty for the critic which does not exist in the instance of a rounded and finished treatise, to determine the real form and matter of his system.”<sup>18</sup>

In its “real form and matter”—in the whole of its essence, then—the Coleridgean “system” was determined by its “critic,” without whom it “does not exist.” One hundred and fifty years on, Shedd’s editorial metaphysic has life in it yet. Elinor Shaffer’s reading of Coleridge and the textual practices of the Higher Criticism in “*Kubla Khan*” and “*The Fall of Jerusalem*” archly takes its title from Coleridge’s most famous poems interrupted and never started,<sup>19</sup> while J. Robert Barth regards his *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* as reconstructive surgery, “an attempt to present in an organized way, as Coleridge himself did not, his matured views on Christian doctrine.”<sup>20</sup> But Coleridge was the first to recognize this shared author-function, in a conditional proof of his conditional style of publishing without publicity:

I am abused, & insolently reprov'd, as a man, with reference to my supposed private Habits, for *not publishing* . . . but I *could* rebut the charge, & not merely say but prove—that there is not a man in England, whose Thoughts, Images, Words & Erudition have been published in larger quantities than *mine*—tho', I must admit, not *by or for myself*.<sup>21</sup>

“*Mine*,” but “not *by or for myself*”: the practice of writing for Socrates, Jesus, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This sublime humility has bound the “Sage” to his students for almost two hundred years, tallying the property under consideration—whether notes left in someone else’s book, or speculations recomposed by editorial speculation—as both “Coleridge” and “text,” a critical communion allegorized in the question heralding the consummation of the *Opus Maximum* in 2002: “Why is it necessary to discuss a work that does not even exist, and to do so at great length?”<sup>22</sup>

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Church and State,” x–xi.

18. Shedd, “Introductory Essay,” 10.

19. Elinor Shaffer, “*Kubla Khan*” and “*The Fall of Jerusalem*”: *The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

20. J. Robert Barth, S.J., *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), vii.

21. Letter to Daniel Stuart, 12 September 1814, in *Collected Letters*, 3:532.

22. *Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas McFarland, with the assistance of Nicholas Halmi, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), xiii.

This alliance between hierophant and clerisy—between unfinished writing, and reading between the lines—was the complex of Coleridge’s conservatism. Coleridgeans might call it “scholarship.” Coleridge’s name for it was “Lay Sermon”:

When I named this Essay a Sermon, I sought to prepare the inquirers after it for the absence of all the usual softenings suggested by worldly prudence, of all compromise between truth and courtesy. But not even as a Sermon would I have addressed the present Discourse to a promiscuous audience; and for this reason I likewise announced it in the title-page, as exclusively *ad clerum*; i.e. (in the old and wide sense of the word) to men of clerklly acquirements, of whatever profession. I would the greater part of our publications could be thus directed, each to its appropriate class of Readers. But this cannot be! For among other odd burs and kecksies, the misgrowth of our luxuriant activity, we have now a READING PUBLIC—as strange a phrase, methinks, as ever forced a splenetic smile on the staid countenance of Meditation; and yet no fiction! (*LS* 35–37)

In the first (and for years, the only) congenial response to the *Lay Sermons*, Henry Crabb Robinson applauded these clean discriminations, since “too many readers presume that they are written for in every book they take in hand, and too many writers aspire to the rare glory of addressing, with effect, readers of every description.”<sup>23</sup> Right thinking, Coleridge confided to John Gibson Lockhart, was co-extensive with right breeding, and an address “to the Higher Classes of Society” synonymous with “to the Learned.”<sup>24</sup>

The careful epistemology of the *Lay Sermons*, then, was politics by another name, and demographics in masquerade, since the generalizing power of the universalizing Reason was socially particular in composition. In preaching to “men in whom I may hope to find, if not philosophy, yet occasional impulses at least to philosophic thought,” Coleridge intoned, “I appeal exclusively to men from whose station and opportunities I may dare anticipate a respectable portion of that ‘*sound book learnedness*,’ into which our old public schools still continue to initiate their pupils” (*LS* 39). As this argument unfolded, in the *Lay Sermons* and later, the philosophical rigor of the initiated pupil became the grammar of social control. The

23. [Henry Crabb Robinson], “Coleridge’s *Statesman’s Manual*,” in *Critical Review* 5.1 (January 1817): 42–48 (42).

24. Coleridge’s marginalia from Lockhart’s presentation copy (Copy L): “So it was ordered to be printed, and so, I believe, it was advertised” (*Lay Sermons*, 3–4n1).

well-ordered mind ordered a flourishing cultural domain, which ordered the cultivated nation, which ordered its best minds with “a respectable portion of that ‘*sound book learnedness*’” still lingering at Eton, Harrow, and perhaps Christ’s Hospital. Here was the loop of mutual reformation and superintendence, of “equipoise and interdependency,” the “*lex equi-libri*” that Coleridge would ultimately identify as the real “constitution” of Church, State, and subject (CCS 23).

Within this equilibrium, cultural disruptions were urgently political in mode of effect and means of redress. The *Lay Sermons* introduced Coleridge’s conviction that unchecked discourse, “the evils of a rank and unweeded Press” (LS 151), was cause, not consequence, of “the Existing Distresses and Discontents” announced on the title page of the second *Sermon*. It was “among the miseries of the present age that it recognizes no medium between *Literal* and *Metaphorical*” (LS 30). But this meant that the miseries of the present age should be recognized as representational rather than material, since compelling narrative—organizing consciousness as prelude to organizing men—was more dangerous than the hardest fact: “[w]here distress is felt, tales of wrong and oppression are readily believed. . . . Rage and Revenge make the cheek pale and the hand tremble, *worse than even want itself*” (LS 163). Even *On the Constitution of Church and State*, witnessing the apocalyptic failure of the Anglican order, still girded itself for combat with a modern Beast. The real Dragon wasn’t the old hierarchy of Roman superstition, but the “Reading Public,” “the present much-reading, but not very hard-reading age” sapping the nation’s fiber, a “Public” Coleridge solemnly placed alongside the Pope within “the Third Possible Church, Neither National nor Universal, or the CHURCH OF ANTICHRIST” (CCS 134).

Though this argument would climax in 1829, it began fifteen years earlier with the *Lay Sermons*. They stand, in almost every recent critical account, as the most complete genre of the Romantic Ideology, the idealization of a readership harmoniously attuned to their own self-representations, as reading and representation become the final form of political expression. For Jerome McGann, the *Lay Sermons* propose a “clearly deplorable . . . conceptual-idealist defense of Church, State, and the class interests which those institutions support and defend,”<sup>25</sup> while Lucy Newlyn finds them “a kind of Malthusian nightmare” of a country “over-run by a new race of unreflecting, unspiritual readers.”<sup>26</sup> The *Sermons*,

25. McGann, *Romantic Ideology*, 5.

26. Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism*, 55. This population boom, according to Jon Klancher, was checked by only the superintendence of the newly theorized

on David Riede's map, are the pious turn "from poetic anxieties to critical certitudes," the maturation (or senescence) of a prose which "literally glosses . . . over" the "uncertainties and anxieties" that had agitated Coleridge's youthful verse, politics, and faith.<sup>27</sup> But what has become critically normative would have surprised the Regency, where "lay sermons"—and Coleridge's in particular—were understood as just the sort of demotic writing and bad speech threatening the nation.

## Sibyl

By the time of the *Lay Sermons*, Coleridge had returned to the faith of his vicar father, and was once again a loyal son of the Church of England. He had precisely dated his abandonment of Unitarianism to one-thirty in the afternoon, 12 February 1805,<sup>28</sup> and his Trinitarianism had only deepened over a period of intense personal crisis in late 1813 and early 1814. J. Robert Barth describes this as a second "kind of conversion,"<sup>29</sup> and Coleridge's soteriology hardened into an increasingly uncompromising Calvinism.<sup>30</sup> But no amount of private conformity could make "the genre

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clerisy, an institutionalized bulwark of reading and writing "capable of governing the relations between all the emerging audiences of the nineteenth century over whom, individually, no institution could claim control" (*Making of English Reading Audiences*, 151). Robert Keith Lapp has persuasively argued that the *Lay Sermons* attempt to interrupt any "projection into nineteenth-century print culture of the universalizing and democratizing ideals of the coffeehouse culture of the eighteenth-century public sphere"; they instead endorse a "withdrawal into visionary idealism that locates cultural authority in the attractive figure of the poet-prophet" (*Contest for Cultural Authority: Hazlitt, Coleridge, and the Distresses of the Regency* [Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1999], 12).

27. David G. Riede, *Oracles and Hierophants*, 173.

28. This notebook entry was more sure in its time-stamp than its "Conviction," however, haltingly recording what Coleridge wished to believe, rather than what he did: "No Christ, No God!—This I now feel with all its needful evidence, of the Understanding: would to God, my spirit were made to conform thereto—that No Trinity, no God . . . O that this Conviction may work upon me and in me/and that my mind may be made up as to the character of Jesus, and of historical Christianity, as clearly as it is Christ the Logos and intellectual or spiritual Christianity." *Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2:2448.

29. Barth, *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine*, 24n25; see also Barth, "Coleridge and the Church of England," 291–307.

30. In 1813, he bleakly confessed to Thomas Roberts, "our souls are infinite in depth, and therefore our sins are infinite, and redeemable only by an infinitely higher infinity; that of the Love of God in Christ Jesus. I have called my soul infinite, but O infinite in the depth of darkness, an infinite craving, an infinite capacity of pain and weakness, and excellent only as being passively capacious of the light from above . . . O God save me—save me from myself. . . ." (c.19 December 1813, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*,

of ‘Layman’s Sermon’ . . . underscore” an “alignment with Tory ideology” and “a pious adherence to the doctrinal authority of the Established Church.”<sup>31</sup> From the instantiation of the Clarendon Code in the 1660s, until the amendment of the Act of Uniformity in 1872, the requirements which defined the Church of England in its broadest sense were assent to the Book of Common Prayer, and consent to the episcopal ordination of priests,<sup>32</sup> this latter clause directly forbidding lay preaching within the Anglican communion. In 1824, Southey’s *Book of the Church* still celebrated the collapse of nonconforming excess in the 1680s, when the “crazier sects disappeared; and lay preaching, from which so many evils had arisen, was no longer heard of, except among the Quakers.”<sup>33</sup> For most of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, churchmen and “reasonable” Dissenters were united in considering “lay sermons” contemptible violations of sound theology and polite society.<sup>34</sup>

Coleridge’s *Lay Sermons* exhorted the nation to Fear God, and Honor the King, but their generic history rattled the cage their argument tried to lock shut. The result was politically and tonally akin to the intellectual “muddle” Seamus Perry locates elsewhere in Coleridge’s philosophy, that special “kind of comprehensiveness” found only in a “kind of contradictoriness,” which took irreconcilable differences, rather than their

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3:463); by the middle of 1820, he was marginalizing in the *Reliquiae Baxterianae* that the “introduction (& after-predominance) of Latitudinarianism <under the name of> Arminianism,” was one of “the grand Evil Epochs of the our present Church,” and he anticipated a moment when “*Arminianism*, will be regarded as to express a habit of Belief opposed not to Calvinism or the Works of Calvin, but to the Articles of our own Church, and to the Doctrine in which *all* the first Reformers agreed” (*Marginalia*, 1:358).

31. Lapp, *Contest for Cultural Authority*, 55.

32. Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment*, 1:32.

33. Southey, *Book of the Church*, 2:475.

34. Anna Barbauld, for instance, was clear that her popularizing *Civic Sermons* made no appeal to the promiscuous audience of Methodist lay preaching. “You are invited, therefore, by those who wish the welfare of their country, and your welfare, to gain just ideas of what concerns it; for, by having false ideas, you may do much harm: but do not mistake me, you are not *all* invited. You who are dissolute, idle, intemperate, savage in your manners, profligate in your principles, without care for yourselves, or for those who depend upon your labour; who prey upon the honest industry of others; who are ignorant, not merely from want of information, but from a debased and besotted understanding—to you I do not speak, you *must* be governed like brutes; for you *are* brutes. You own no law, cannot judge of laws. You *must* be slaves, not thro’ the appointment of men, but by the eternal laws of nature.” Only those men who, “in whatever rank of life you are,” managed to conform to middle-class respectability—“you who have a love of order, a sense of ingenuous shame, a relish for the conveniencies and decencies which civilized life affords”—were admitted to her text and her state. [Anna Barbauld], *Civic Sermons to the People, Number 1* (London: J. Johnson, 1792), 17–19.

dialectical solutions, as the grand labor of “a real, though ruinous, kind of genius.”<sup>35</sup> Ruinous, but also self-ruined. If the idea of “Coleridge,” especially in its highest mode, depended on the help of others, that handful of men investing their own intelligence and dignity in order to compound both in accounts of the “Sage,” the *Lay Sermons* prevented that transaction, identifying instead with a company of preachers, prophets, and madwomen at the very bottom of the “READING PUBLIC,” when they were literate at all.

This set of guilty associations made Coleridge appear as one of the most farcical enthusiasts in recent history. Though he would be rescued by the middle of the nineteenth century, what impressed many of his readers in the aftermath of the *Lay Sermons* was that he didn’t much want to be rescued. On the contrary, Coleridge was engaged in a sustained effort to advertise Methodistical sympathies even to those who had little reason to suspect them in the first place. For years, he had dreamed: “Socinianism, moonlight; Methodism, a stove. O for some sun to unite heat and light!”<sup>36</sup>

The *Lay Sermons* were not this celestial union of reason and enthusiasm, genteel sense and vigorous sensibility—not in their reception, nor, I think, in their intention. They presented instead deliberate, but incompletely managed, provocations to misreading, burying their most reactionary arguments in enthusiastic code, and flaunting rhetorical extravagances alien to their reactionary agenda, while offering these misdirections as a misrecognized, but absolute, sort of cultural prowess.

Though Coleridge’s would be put to more flexible uses, “lay sermons” were rigid parsers for the nation’s denominations. Evangelicals within the Church often had mainly disciplinary, rather than doctrinal, differences from Calvinist Methodists outside it, and for many years, Claphamite disdain for lay preaching was the major division between Evangelicalisms that less “awakened” churchmen could detect. Rational Dissent, in demographic decay if not intellectual quiescence from the end of the seventeenth century, armored its ministers with a depth of learning and middle-class respectability that certified they were governed by most of the ideological

35. Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 25; 2.

36. *Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1:467. Coleridge voiced a similar (and more clearly political) sentiment in his 1795 *Lectures*, early experiments in a kind of rationalist lay preaching: “He would appear to me to have adopted the best as well as the most benevolent mode of diffusing Truth, who uniting the zeal of the Methodist with the views of the Philosopher, should be *personally* among the Poor, and teach them their *Duties* in order that he may render them susceptible of their *Rights*.” *Lectures 1795, On Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 43.

pressures that episcopal ordination was meant to signify. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the Methodists were largely unique in sending forth their lay cohort of (in Southey's taxonomy from 1804) "tradesmen of the lowest orders, bakers, barbers and taylors, perhaps servants or labourers" to preach.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the insubordination of the Wesleyans only grew more flagrant as the Society grew in strength and its leader in confidence. It was aggravating enough when Wesley deputized hundreds of inadequately educated preachers to move about the country and colonies, but toward the end of his life he began to assume, rather than simply flout, episcopal authority. In 1763, he relied upon an obscure foreigner who spoke no English but claimed to be the exiled Bishop of Crete to ordain his chosen preachers, "upon the principle," which somewhat anticipated by confused parody Coleridge's own sense of *enclisia* and *ecclesia*, "that whoever is episcopally ordained, is a minister of the church universal, and as such has the right to officiate in any part of the globe."<sup>38</sup> By the end of the century, the Methodists were even bolder. In 1784, Wesley ordained Thomas Coke bishop for the "Methodist Church of England in America," on the grounds that these adjectival and prepositional qualifications were security enough against the charge of usurping the powers of the Lords Spiritual; in 1785, he ordained men for service in Scotland, but commanded them to resume the dress and title of lay preachers upon crossing back into England. This delicate balance held for a few years, but by 1789, Wesley had completed his own revolution, cooking up a complicated precedent from the early Church in Alexandria, which made him "as much a Christian bishop as the Archbishop of Canterbury," authorizing him to ordain men in and for England.<sup>39</sup>

The Methodists presented the Establishment with an increasingly pressing conundrum. While the lay preaching by ignorant men clearly eroded one of the two pillars of the Church of England, to which many Wesleyans still professed their support, the Methodist solution—that these men were not lay preachers at all, but just as canonically ordained as any Anglican deacon—traded presumption for schism. The conflict over the

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37. [Robert Southey], "Myles's History of the Methodists," in *The Annual Review, and History of Literature; for 1803*, ed. Arthur Aikin, vol. 2 (London: Longman and Rees, 1804), 201–13 (210). For experiments in itinerancy and some varieties of lay preaching among other Dissenting denominations during the Romantic period, see Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People*.

38. Southey, "Myles's History of the Methodists," 206.

39. See Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 508–23, for a detailed account of the transformations in Methodist ordination.

status and identity of lay preachers drew up along lines which should be familiar by now, and with which Coleridge himself was intimately familiar, as he spent some of 1797 reading preacher's lives in back issues of the *Arminian Magazine*.<sup>40</sup> Whether admiring or acerbic, however, no view of lay preaching found it well-tailored for addressing a "Statesman," or even "the Higher and Middle Classes." They offered the Bread of Life, to be sure, but most lay preachers would have agreed with Thomas Hanson's admission in 1780 that he was "but a brown-bread preacher,"<sup>41</sup> and the great John Nelson gave a sense of the physical platform and social position from which most "lay sermons" were pronounced: on the "washing-tub" he carried with him, turned "mouth downwards, for a standing-place."<sup>42</sup> A Gospel so laundered was ill-fitted for the ostensibly expansive thinking and expensive audience of the *Lay Sermons*. While the Methodists appreciated one preacher in 1790 as an anti-Coleridge, "simple, plain, and clear" in style, a man who "did not perplex his hearers with abstruse reasoning and metaphysical distinctions . . . instead of sending them to a dictionary . . . he pointed them to the Lamb of God,"<sup>43</sup> more familiar voices in Romantic culture were less convinced of even these modest virtues.

According to Leigh Hunt in 1808, the "want of education" among lay preachers was "a satire upon almost every word they utter," conforming to the Methodist conviction that "you must be excessively stupid" in order to "have a perfect comprehension of mysteries": "they utterly reject reason, and then proceed to give you the reason why."<sup>44</sup> *The Preacher's Manual*, an anthology of practical advice for Dissenting ministers popular in the first decades of the nineteenth century, opined in 1820 that while "lay sermons" were not of themselves contrary to Scripture, the Methodists had proved that such sermons were liable to abuse Christianity itself, since the "most ignorant are generally the most conceited; and those who have the least to say, are often the first to speak."<sup>45</sup> The *Examiner* declared lay preachers "bawlers in the highway," and "evangelists who prove their inspiration by abusing the divine gift of language with every possible

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40. See Brantley, *Wordsworth's "Natural Methodism,"* 38–40, for a sense of the impact this may have had on the *annus mirabilis*.

41. Hanson is quoted in Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 2:60.

42. WV 3:66.

43. WV 2:216.

44. Leigh Hunt, "On the Ignorance and Vulgarity of the Methodists," *Examiner* 19 (May 8, 1808): 301–3 (302).

45. *The Preacher's Manual*, 3rd ed. (London: Richard Baynes, 1820), ii.



barbarism,”<sup>46</sup> syllogizing that as “ignorance produces vulgarity,” and “a want of rational conviction produces vehemence,” “accordingly our Methodist preachers are vulgar and vehement.”<sup>47</sup> When brought out of the highway, and into the pulpit, the results were still rough-hewn. The anonymous *Naked Thoughts* dryly noted that such preachers relied on “a deal of vociferation and rodomontade in their sermons, as if their hearers had but one ear apiece,” while using techniques such as “banging the pulpit-cushion” in order to enforce abstruse theology: “when kept in perpetual play under the powerful blows of the preacher,” the pillow “strikingly sets forth the insufficiency of all carnal ease, the fluctuation of all terrestrial grandeur . . . these preachers do not always chuse to verbally inform the people what good they do, but wisely let actions speak for them.”<sup>48</sup> Even members of the Society could be embarrassed, and Wesley found himself ordering one lay preacher, “scream no more at the peril of your soul. . . . Speak with all your heart, but with a moderate voice.”<sup>49</sup>

*The Statesman's Manual* had announced—in its inside voice, tucked away on the back wrapper—a third *Lay Sermon*, “To the lower and Labouring Classes of Society, Printed in a cheap Form for Distribution,” which would take as its text Wesley’s favorite verse, “The Poor have the Gospel preached unto them” (*LS xxxi*). This final homily was abandoned in embryo, and R. J. White, the Bollingen editor of the *Sermons*, “must always regret” the lost “spectacle of the middle-aged Coleridge addressing himself in language understood of the people” (*LS xxxii*). But before Coleridge’s first two attempts, it’s not clear that Romantic culture entertained the possibility of a lay sermon *not* so addressed and “understood.” While Coleridge “never dreamt” that the first could be “understood (except in fragments) by the general reader,”<sup>50</sup> and the second sneered that “[i]n the present day we hear much, and from men of various creeds, of the plainness and simplicity of the Christian religion” (*LS 176*), the “general reader” (and believer) was most likely to anticipate such pious “plainness and simplicity” from something styled a “lay sermon.” As William Law told John Wesley as the latter was embarking on his preaching career:

46. Leigh Hunt, “On the hatred of the Methodists against Moral Preaching, Concluded,” *Examiner* 21 (May 22, 1808): 334–35 (334).

47. Hunt, “On the Ignorance and Vulgarity of the Methodists,” 302.

48. *Naked Thoughts on Some Peculiarities of the Field-Preaching Clergy*, 2–3.

49. The story is related in Albert Lyles, *Methodism Mocked: The Satiric Reaction to Methodism in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Epworth, 1960), 73.

50. To T. G. Street, 22 March 1817, *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 4:713.

You would have a philosophical religion, but there can be no such thing. Religion is the most plain, simple thing in the world. It is only, *we love him because He first loved us*.<sup>51</sup>

For most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “lay sermons” were recognized, even by their proudest performers and most attentive listeners, as incapable of accommodating intellectual labor. They were instead the deliberate anathematization of philosophical nuance, rhetorical sophistication, and the tinsel distracting the earnest Christian from the plain truth of salvation.

This was their most positive construction, at any rate. For much of polite culture, however, “lay sermons” denoted the marriage of dogmatic simplicity to obscurantist mystery, both of which appealed to the blank idiocy of lay preachers and their congregations. The “Ignorance and Vulgarity of the Methodists,” Hunt fumed, made them dismiss ungodly things like “scholastic learning, which they entitle *worldly wisdom, carnal knowledge, and the learning of this world*.”<sup>52</sup> The “unlearned Methodist” preacher, who “wants the regularity and distinctness of a cultivated mind,”<sup>53</sup> came to identify habitual mental darkness as spiritual illumination. “They are,” Hazlitt advised his guests at the *Round Table*, “dull and gross in apprehension, and therefore they are glad to substitute faith for reason, and to plunge in the dark, under the supposed sanction of superior wisdom, into every species of mystery and jargon.”<sup>54</sup> Such “mystery and jargon” won more converts than it lost, since (in Hunt’s arithmetic) “vulgarity and obscurity” inevitably equaled “popularity; and popularity, as Mr. WHITFIELD says, makes one’s sermons *every where called for*.”<sup>55</sup> The “popularity” of lay sermons attracted a monster more gruesome than even Coleridge’s “READING PUBLIC,” a plague cult of “scarecrows,” “melancholy tailors, consumptive hair-dressers, squinting cobblers, women with child or in the ague”: “a collection of religious invalids . . . the refuse of all that is weak and unsound in body and mind.”<sup>56</sup>

If Coleridge was attempting to “clear the faith in supernatural mystery from all taint of weak-minded credulity,” as Frederick Burwick argues, no

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51. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 1:77.

52. Hunt, “On the Ignorance and Vulgarity of the Methodists,” 302.

53. Hunt, “On the Ignorance and Vulgarity of the Methodists,” 301.

54. Hazlitt, “On the Causes of Methodism,” 58.

55. Hunt, “On the hatred of the Methodists against Moral Preaching, Concluded,” 335.

56. Hazlitt, “On the Causes of Methodism,” 58–59.

form was worse equipped to handle such a clearance.<sup>57</sup> Tim Fulford's sense that "Lay Sermon" was meant to title "a spiritual language of accepted importance and inherent invulnerability" to "personal fallibilities of style and conduct" seems to me equally unlikely, since the genre localized exactly these "fallibilities."<sup>58</sup> Certainly very few contemporary readers recognized any transvaluation of Methodistical affiliations. On the contrary, the *Lay Sermons*, almost without exception, were received as disturbingly true performances in the genre they named. What would come to be understood as de Manian complexity was originally taken as vulgar mystery, continental metaphysics as homegrown enthusiasm. Even Coleridge's profound conservatism appeared as shocking personal and political disorder. Friendly responses simply didn't exist for several decades. Southey, though begged by him "who was once your Coleridge" to do something for them in the *Quarterly*, left his copies uncut, as did the Wordsworths.<sup>59</sup> Cold indifference was their warmest reception.

The usual foes of lay sermons roused themselves against the *Lay Sermons*, pressing anti-Methodism into service as anti-Coleridgeanism. Hazlitt and Hunt set the tone in two reviews in the *Examiner*, Hazlitt's third following in the *Edinburgh Review*. Each review targeted Coleridge's "senseless jargon,"<sup>60</sup> and an argument so "obscure, that it has been supposed to be written in cipher, and that it is necessary to read it upwards or downwards, or backwards and forwards, as it happens, to make head or tail of it."<sup>61</sup> But this esoterica wasn't Kantean *Kritik*, according to Hazlitt. Rather, it was the flatus of that "state of voluntary self-delusion, into

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57. Frederick Burwick, "Coleridge and De Quincey on Miracles," in Barth, *Fountain Light*, 193–230 (194).

58. Fulford, *Coleridge's Figurative Language*, 140.

59. Coleridge pleaded with Southey's presentation copy in classical code (perhaps to preserve his fragile dignity against unsympathetic eyes in Southey's household), "*Quod ad hoc opus refert, te rogo ut me, olim tuum Coleridgium, adjuves: potes enim, nec minus vir*" (Copy RS; LS 243). On the fate, cut and uncut, of the presentation copies, see LS 235–40. Though R. J. White finds Southey's "copies of the Lay Sermons were still uncut" upon his death (LS xxx), Southey demonstrated some awareness of their argument, which suggests he knew more of them than their covers. He praised (faintly) "some excellent remarks" in the second *Lay Sermon* to Humphrey Senhouse, 22 March 1817: "If Coleridge could but learn how to deliver his opinions in a way to make them read, and to separate that which would be profitable for all, from that which scarcely half a dozen men in England can understand (I certainly am not one of the number), he would be the most useful man of the age, as I verily believe him in acquirements and in powers of mind to be very far the greatest." *Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, 4:258.

60. William Hazlitt, "Coleridge's *Lay-Sermon*," *Edinburgh Review* 27.54 (December 1816): 444–59 (451).

61. Hazlitt, "Mr. Coleridge's Lay Sermon," in *Works* 7:114–18 (115n1).

which [Coleridge] has thrown himself,” in which “he mistakes hallucinations for truths”.<sup>62</sup> a fog of canting mystery which lifted to reveal not the philosopher-seer, but only “a maudlin Methodistical lay-preacher, . . . Mr. Coleridge.”<sup>63</sup> Henry Crabb Robinson shrugged that first *Lay Sermon* “will assuredly be but little read, and by its readers be but little enjoyed or understood,”<sup>64</sup> and those few who did dip into them found only a festering swamp of enthusiasm. “‘Mystic’ rant,” wrote the *Monthly Repository*,<sup>65</sup> “absurd rhapsodies,” according to the *Monthly Magazine*: “[t]o reason with a person of this cast would be as hopeless an undertaking as to reason with the inmates of Bedlam.”<sup>66</sup> This innuendo of generalized insanity coded a denominationally focused slur, as well, since Bedlam “admitted ninety patients between 1772 and 1795 who were suffering from ‘religion and Methodism.’”<sup>67</sup> Southey declared in 1803 the “increase of madness, in England, has been proportioned to the increase of methodism.”

This is not lightly hazarded, nor ignorantly affirmed. Positively and knowingly we assert, that the increase of madness, religious madness, the worst form of the worst calamity which flesh is heir to, has been proportioned to, and occasioned by the growth of methodism.<sup>68</sup>

This critique of the *Lay Sermons*—as Methodistically off-kilter in argument, fatuously self-satisfied in tone, and blissfully clueless in authorial persona—became the touchstone for Coleridge’s reputation until the 1830s. Morton Paley suggests that the popularity of Coleridge’s poetry in the “Annuals” from the 1820s until his death came burnished with the prestige of his heavy-duty thinking elsewhere, and that readers, “whether or not familiar with the *Lay Sermons*, *Philosophical Lectures*, or *Aids to Reflection*, would have at least known of them by reputation and could be assumed to regard seriously a poem by Coleridge.”<sup>69</sup> But this isn’t the

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62. Hazlitt, “Coleridge’s *Lay-Sermon*,” 446.

63. Hazlitt, “The Fudge Family in Paris,” in *Works* 7:287–97 (288).

64. [Crabb Robinson], “Coleridge’s Statesman’s Manual,” 43.

65. “Coleridge’s *Lay Sermon*,” in *The Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature* 12 (May 1817): 299–301 (299).

66. “Critical Notices of New Books,” *Monthly Magazine and British Reader*, 43 (May 1817), 354.

67. Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 38.

68. Southey, “Myles’s History of the Methodists,” 211.

69. Morton D. Paley, “Coleridge and the Annuals,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 57.1 (Winter 1994): 1–24 (5).

whole story. Those who knew Coleridge's prose only by hearsay or periodical review would have had very little reason to be impressed, or to suspect the author even capable of thought more sustained than the lyric before them.

In 1826, the *British Critic* found that as he discoursed on "spiritual religion," Coleridge became, "in proportion," "less and less intelligible."<sup>70</sup> John Wilson, meanwhile, thought the hieroglyphic difficulty of much of the *Biographia* symptomatic of the "miserable pretensions of Mr Coleridge," who affected to believe that "his own wild ravings are holy and inspired," as his prose deliberately darkened "what was dark before into tenfold obscurity." Like any other fraudulent "prophet," Coleridge treated "the most ordinary common-places as to give them the air of mysteries."<sup>71</sup> The eremitical retreat of the Sage that Coleridge presumed for himself was better recognized as the involuntary lock-up of the addled zealot, alleged the *New Monthly Magazine*, which was "as glad to escape from the . . . opinions of Mr. Coleridge, as we would to the light of day from the darkened cell of a religious enthusiast whose visions and prophecies have rendered confinement necessary for himself and society."<sup>72</sup>

As both *Edinburgh* periodicals agreed, the *Lay Sermons*, and the feeble flurry of activity following them, were the pathetic evidence of the final collapse of Coleridge's politics, theology, sanity, and masculinity. The shattered husk of disappointment and delusion that remained found its only echo in the sad fate of the serving-girl who had grown up in Ottery St. Mary alongside the son of its vicar, and who shared with him a presumption to "visions and prophecies." "The vagaries, whimsies, and pregnant throes of Joanna Southcote," Hazlitt thundered in the *Edinburgh Review*, "were sober and rational, compared with Mr Coleridge's qualms and crude conceptions, and promised deliverance in this Lay-Sermon."<sup>73</sup> Wilson wasn't any kinder in *Blackwood's*, marking the precedent for Coleridge's conceit in connecting "his own name in Poetry with Shakespeare, and Spenser, and Milton; in politics with Burke, and Fox, and Pitt; in metaphysics with Locke, and Hartley, and Berkeley, and Kant": "So deplorable a delusion as this has only been equaled by that of Joanna Southcote, who mistook a complaint in the bowels for the divine afflatus;

70. "Coleridge's *Aids* and Leighton's *Works*," *British Critic* 3 (October 1826): 239–80 (260).

71. [John Wilson], "Observations on Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 2.7 (October 1817): 3–18 (2–8).

72. Review of *Biographia Literaria*, *New Monthly Magazine* 43 (August 1817): 50.

73. Hazlitt, "Coleridge's *Lay-Sermon*," 446.

and believed herself about to give birth to the regenerator of the world, when sick unto death of an incurable and loathsome disease.”<sup>74</sup>

My story turns to Southcott, and the meaning her writings and “pregnancy” held for the early nineteenth century, in the next chapter. For now, I’d like to dwell on the Coleridgean causes and consequences of this mockery, which laughed his Jeremiad to the polite classes into a potted Joanniad, fit only for those whom Hazlitt called “the refuse of all that is weak and unsound in body and mind.” We overlook much of the color “Coleridge” wore for Romantic culture if we discard these judgments as “deliberately unfair,” the public expression of (especially) Hazlitt’s private animus, and the willful misidentification of an admittedly troubled Sage as the hysterical, menopausally fertile, illiterate woman who had been educated and alienated by his father’s sermons, yet with whom Tim Fulford finds “no sympathy” in Coleridge.<sup>75</sup> Hazlitt’s barbs were certainly bloodthirsty: “[Coleridge] is the Dog in the Manger of literature, an intellectual Mar-Plot, who will neither let any body else come to a conclusion, nor come to one himself.”<sup>76</sup> The sting was only magnified by delivery in an infamously prophylactic “review by anticipation,” which appeared in the *Examiner* months before the first *Lay Sermon* had been published, and perhaps even written. But Coleridge’s own account, that this was the inevitable issue of family romance, a “rhapsody of predetermined insult”<sup>77</sup> void of substance other than the Oedipal, is partial.<sup>78</sup>

Personal slanders were political critique, and Hazlitt’s pre-emptive reviewing disclosed historical, rather than familial, overdetermination. After a century of Methodist preaching, a mere advertisement of title was sufficient proof for an elaborate indictment of enthusiasm. The *Lay Sermons* staged a drama far exceeding the domestic, and though Hazlitt’s tripled flayings in the *Examiner* and *Edinburgh Review* stole the show, his was hardly the only role. The consensus which held Coleridge neither

74. Wilson, “Observations on Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*,” 5–6.

75. Tim Fulford, “Apocalyptic and Reactionary?: Coleridge as Hermeneutist,” *The Modern Language Review* 81.1 (January 1992): 18–31 (19).

76. Hazlitt, “Mr. Coleridge’s *Lay Sermon*,” 115.

77. *Biographia Literaria*, 2:242.

78. In the long account he gave to Francis Wrangham (5 June 1817), Coleridge martyred himself as Hazlitt’s surrogate parent, while alluding to his quondam child’s “unmanly vices” and the “infamous Punishment” for sexual assault from which Coleridge and Southey “snatched” him, a gift which festered into Hazlitt’s resentment: “his very Father & Mother having despaired of him,” Coleridge had “given him all the money, I had in the world, and the very Shoes off my feet to enable him to escape over the mountains”; “He has repeatedly boasted, that he wrote the very contrary of all, he believed—because he was under heavy obligations, and therefore *bated* me” (*Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 4:735–36).

“as a major theologian, someone increasingly respected as an *orthodox* thinker,”<sup>79</sup> nor as an advanced proponent of the Higher Criticism, skeptically threatening all the ancient proofs of Christianity, was diverse and tenacious in the 1810s and 1820s, when many of the appreciators of his philosophy could (and often did) fit in Gillman’s parlor. In the wake of the *Lay Sermons*, Coleridge owned a reputation as a man socially, intellectually, and temporally *retrograde*, a bizarre fanatic attempting to pass off exploded dogmas and village superstitions as grand writing and serious thought, and explicit identifications with Methodism were still current in the 1840s.<sup>80</sup>

As reviewers pointed out, if this was unjust, the author himself had suggested the critique. Coleridge’s strategy for brand management was one part self-promotion, two parts self-immolation: following his skewering as Southcott’s heir after her death in 1814, he made the (sublimely poor) decision to style his come-back volume of poetry *Sibylline Leaves*. Early notices, such as that in the *Literary Gazette*, were bemused by such a “strangely christened work,” the deliberate reminder of a shared history in Devonshire at a time when it had been “overrun with fanatical preachers” and aspiring prophetesses,<sup>81</sup> in a volume meant to resuscitate rather than annihilate a reputation:

“Sibylline,” says our Dictionary, “of or belonging to a Sibyl or *Prophetess*”: the word cannot therefore, we hope, be appropriated by Mr. Coleridge, who is not so humble a poet as to assume, voluntarily, the character of an old woman.<sup>82</sup>

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79. Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 5.

80. William Mitchell, for example, compared Coleridge’s “patchwork system” of “Luther, Jeremy Taylor, Leighton, More, Swedenborg, Jacob Behmen, Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, and Schelling” with that of “Mr W.[esley],” that “certain divine” condemned in the 1770s by his Calvinist opponent (Augustus) “Toplady.” Wesley’s “very singular mixture of Manichaeism, Pelagianism, Popery, Socinianism, Ranterism, and Atheism” made him, like Coleridge, an indiscriminate pillager of high and low thought, “good and bad” men, and so “*Aliquis in omnibus, nullus in singulis*” (*Coleridge and the Moral Tendency of his Writings*, 16).

81. One biographer of Southcott reminded readers in 1814 of the condition of Ottery St. Mary and its surroundings several decades earlier: “Devonshire was, at that time, overrun with fanatical preachers, a class so well ridiculed in the *Spiritual Quixote*, the revered writer of which actually lays his scene not far from Joanna’s immediate neighbourhood.” *La Belle Assemblée*, September 1814, 100.

82. Review of *Sibylline Leaves*, *Literary Gazette*, and *Journal of Belles Lettres* 1.27 (July 26, 1817): 49–51 (49).

No one was willing to trek all the way back to Cumae when a West-Country Sibyl was so near at hand. Coleridge unmanned himself in the oracular distinction meant to authorize him, prophetic power doubling into the insanity of a modern peasant. More to the point, few contemporaries were sure whether this was an allusion gone awry, or whether Coleridge had intended Southcott all along. After all, his intricate epistemology climaxed in a wild paean to a wise woman and maddened virgin, which many people knew not as an ancient holiness, but as the bad joke which had consumed the newspapers and embarrassed the nation over the past few years. Knowledge, concluded *The Statesman's Manual*, was where Heraclitus had found it, not in the Sage but the Sibyl:

Multiscience (or a variety and quantity of acquired knowledge) does not teach intelligence. But the SIBYLL with wild enthusiastic mouth shrilling forth unmirthful, inornate, and unperfumed truths reaches to a thousand years with her voice through the power of God. (*LS* 26)

Hazlitt, eyeing misbegotten conceptions closer to home than those of the “sad and recluse philosopher,” jeered: “It is not easy to conceive any thing better than this.”<sup>83</sup>

The abuse of Coleridge, then, was that Coleridge was a self-abuser—not an enthusiast of uncertain sociosexual proclivities, exactly, but an enthusiast for introducing himself as such. Even Hazlitt acknowledged his victim’s real capabilities, in an early draft of “My First Acquaintance with Poets” submitted as an anonymous letter “To the Editor of the Examiner,” in response to his own reviews of the *Sermons*. The failure of Promethean promise into monstrous accomplishment was the ground for Hazlitt’s complaint, and he sued for the “breach of confidence” between “[t]hat Sermon” of 1798, eloquently expounding the Good Old Cause of Dissenting liberty, and “this Sermon” of 1816, shamelessly toadying for Old Corruption.<sup>84</sup> But Coleridge’s crisis of confidence seemed more severe than this familiar apostasy. The self-sabotage of his newfound orthodoxy was immediately provoking: a conservatism clashing with its Methodistical fabric irritated more than the turning of a decades-old coat, and reviewers sympathetic to the Coleridge of *The Courier* were clearly disgusted with the *Lay Sermons*. Reducing the issue to disenchantment or default misses the temporal and ideological peculiarities of Coleridge’s betrayal. The *Lay*

83. Hazlitt, “Coleridge’s *Lay-Sermon*,” 456.

84. Hazlitt, “Mr Coleridge’s *Lay-Sermon*, To the Editor of the Examiner,” in *Works* 7:128–29.



*Sermons* certainly contradicted the Unitarian radicalism of the 1790s—but they also contradicted *themselves*, their cronism and Methodism at cross-purposes. The oscillations between authoritarian politics and enthusiastic cover were at least as dizzying as the turn from “*that*” to “*this Sermon*,” and if Coleridge no longer believed in the doctrine of the one, it wasn’t at all obvious that he was committed to the other.

The *Lay Sermons* implied not that Coleridge had changed his faith, but that he had lost it entirely—even his faith in the politically expedient. This may have been the self-abnegating insecurity of a man shattered by decades of addiction, tortured erotic and domestic histories, desperate professional and economic failure, suicidal thoughts and a nearly mortal overdose during the dissolution of the Morgan establishment, and depression so acute it was formally managed in his negotiations with publishers.<sup>85</sup> Even so, personal flagellation had a public history. Serious Calvinism often ended in self-loathing, while sanctioning exposure as atonement. George Whitefield’s tract on his own compulsive masturbation was a memorable example: “my secret and darling Sin” proved “that I was conceived and born in Sin;—that in me dwelleth no good Thing by Nature;—and that, if GOD had not freely prevented me by his Grace, I must have been for ever banished from his Divine Presence.”<sup>86</sup> This was the only

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85. Listing the points of business to be discussed with Thomas Curtis (April 1817), Coleridge mentioned “Fifthly, Misery, Sickness, Despondence, etc.” as reasons for “my resolve never to make even a *conditional* promise for the future.” *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 4:727.

86. George Whitefield, *A Short Account of God’s Dealings with the Reverend Mr. George Whitfield, A.B., Late of Pembroke-College, Oxford* (Edinburgh: T. Lumisden and J. Robertson, 1741), 5–6. Whitefield’s account of his masturbation wasn’t short, but it was tragically performative. He played up the role of his “hands,” and the “groans” and “feelings” of their “Effects”: “*Satan*” and some “Evil Communications with my old School-fellows soon corrupted my good Manners.—By seeing their evil Practices, the Sense of the Divine Presence I had vouchsafed unto me, insensibly wore off my Mind; and I at length fell into an abominable secret Sin, the dismal Effects of which I have felt, and groaned under ever since. But GOD, whose Gifts and Callings are without Repentance, would let nothing pluck me out of his Hands, tho’ I was continually doing Despite to the Spirit of Grace” (*Short Account*, 11–12). One contemporary made Whitefield’s self-mortifying irony into pure bawdy: “As the Species of Commerce above-mentioned is generally transacted between a Man and himself, both Agent and Patient being centered in the Individual, I apprehend that Witnesses are seldom needful; nevertheless, as Mr. W—d and his old Crony were seldom asunder, it is not to be supposed that the former had all the Fatigue: *Satan* certainly lent his Friend an *helping Hand* towards the Dispatch of the *Sport* . . . my Reverend Author returned the *Kindness* of his officious Friend, and—the *Devil*, in his Turn: Tho’, as Charity exacts from us the most favourable Construction upon Things doubtful, and as the Gratitude of Mr. W—d was never yet called into Question, I shall conclude that the *Benefit* was *reciprocal*.” [R—ph J—ps—n], *Expounder Expounded*, 40–41. More

logic, doctrinal or otherwise, with which *Blackwood's* could make sense of Coleridge's fascination with his own ridiculousness. The *Biographia*, Wilson warned, was miserable for everyone concerned, strengthening "every argument against the composition of such Memoirs" in the exhibition of "many mournful sacrifices of personal dignity, after which it seems impossible that Mr Coleridge can be greatly respected either by the public, or himself."<sup>87</sup>

Coleridge played off any identifications of Sage with Sibyl, philosopher-gentleman with unwashed lay preacher, as unflattering, but not unplanned. They were penance for sins unnamed and perhaps uncommitted, a uniquely contemporary cut of hair-shirt, weaving discourse as the fiber of humiliation, scratching a mortified sanctification out of the sociolect instead of the body. Pausing to review an exhausting, mystically rhapsodic account of the sixth and "inner sense" that consumed "Appendix C" to *The Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge acknowledged that he had no doubt just made charges of enthusiasm inevitable and accurate.

It has been asked why knowing myself to be the object of personal slander, (slander as unprovoked as it is groundless, unless acts of kindness are provocation) I furnish this material for it, by pleading in palliation of so chimerical a fancy. With that half-playful sadness, which at once sighs and smiles, I answered: why not for that very reason?—Viz. in order that my calumniator might have, if not a material, yet some basis for the poison-gas of his invention to combine with? (*LS* 82)

This melancholy ethic—not turning the other cheek, so much as slapping it oneself in order to justify the assailant's initial violence—preached the sublimity of sublimation, the boundless representational capacity of the "half-playful" self, which, nourished on bitterness, wore a Janus-like visage, "at once sighs and smiles": "There is a grace that would enable us to take up vipers, and the evil thing shall not hurt us: a spiritual alchemy which can transmute poisons into a panacea" (*LS* 35).

In its "grace," this "spiritual alchemy" was a reminder that social degradation might ultimately change into spiritual glorification, though Coleridge's was more modern than medieval in result. Almost no one received it as such, but this strange brew of "poisons into a panacea"—Methodistical extravagance and philosophical method, Southcottian and

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seriously, see Jon Stachniewski's powerful argument on the role of self-hatred in Calvinist spiritual autobiography, *Persecutory Imagination*.

87. Wilson, "Observations on Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*," 5.

Tory sensibilities—was a chemical change in the nature of cultural capital in the Romantic period, and the distillation of something like its modern form. Decades later, Carlyle reported, Coleridge’s reputation was still tenuous, his magisterial prophecy sounding like the humbug of a carnival fortuneteller, even to his disciples: “to the rising spirits of the young generation he had this dusky sublime character; and sat there as a kind of *Magus*, girt in mystery and enigma; his Dodona oak-grove (Mr. Gilman’s [*sic*] house at Highgate) whispering strange things, uncertain whether oracles or jargon.”<sup>88</sup> In its suppressed referent, this syntax was itself “uncertain,” as no one—not Carlyle, not those “rising spirits,” and not even the “*Magus*” himself—was proof against that doubting “whether,” the hinge between pious sense and enthusiastic nonsense. But the clarity of Carlyle’s portrait was its perception that this fuzziness was also the magnetic attraction of the Coleridgean persona, which made a virtue out of its vices. Coleridge’s genius, argued Professor Shedd, wasn’t found in his settled principles, but in what he canceled, complicated, and abandoned to an unsettled energy of “doubts and prejudices”: “Like the *Retractions* of Augustine, the retractions of Coleridge, if we may call them such, have a negative worth almost equal to that of the positive statements to which they lead.”<sup>89</sup>

Shedd had in mind the dialectics propelling Coleridge’s most abstract metaphysics. But the most historically determinate “retraction,” which coyly presumed the community between the clerisy of the *Lay Sermons*, and the plebeian audience of lay sermons, has the most “negative worth,” as it anticipates the rules of art which would obtain long after the Regency. The sanitary line between polite and popular ordered much of Romantic culture, but Pierre Bourdieu argues that emphatic division would come to be seen as only the most primitive gambit in the game of distinction. Ultimately, only those who declined such a move were seriously playing the game, and a frown at the “vulgar” was a middlebrow sort of furrow, a spasm of incomplete refinement and bourgeois insecurity. The most knowing strategy in the play of post-Kantian taste was instead an artistry of refuse, in which not only a studied interest in the romantically “natural” and the conventionally “unmediated,” but the wholesale embrace of the soiled, crude, and calculatedly anti-aesthetic marked the “true” aesthete, in “the audacious imposture of refusing all refusals by recuperating, in parody or sublimation, the very objects refused by the lower-degree

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88. Carlyle, *Life of Sterling*, 70.

89. Shedd, “Introductory Essay,” 14.

aestheticism.”<sup>90</sup> Aesthetics in the shadow of the *Critique of Judgment* qualified “pure taste by the intensity of the impulse denied and the vulgarity refused,” yet Bourdieu finds the consummation of this logic in its own contradiction, the ultimate distinction in the denial of distinction: “the most accomplished art has to be recognized in those works which carry the anti-thesis of civilized barbarism, contained impulse, sublimated coarseness, to the highest degree of tension.”<sup>91</sup>

Hazlitt alone recognized this as the social practice of the *Lay Sermons*. Their titular vulgarity and their stylistic enthusiasms were neither unintended accidents, nor the wounds of the damaged archangel, but a mystified agenda for cultural domination, in which Coleridge demonstrated his Titanism by conquering the arbitrary limits of sense and taste that held smaller men in thrall. *Sibylline Leaves* advertised a perversely Joannian poetics, the *Lay Sermons* a nastily Methodistical theo-politics, because, Hazlitt insisted, Coleridge meant them to. Coleridge might sigh over “personal slander,” “as unprovoked as it is groundless,” but he was deliberately toying with the forbidden, in order to discover the final shock of the new: “Again, he places the seat of truth in *the heart*, of virtue in *the head*; damns a tragedy as shocking that draws tears from the audience, and pronounces a comedy to be inimitable, if nobody laughs at it; labours to unsettle the plainest things by far-fetched sophistry, and makes up for the want of proof in matters of fact by the mechanical operations of the spirit.”<sup>92</sup> Hazlitt peer-reviewed that these experiments in social chemistry weren’t replicable: “There is something, we suspect, in these studies that does not easily amalgamate.”<sup>93</sup> This failed suspension, Hazlitt theorized, was the real compound of Coleridge’s addiction, a dependence on socio-historical portmanteaus as the materials for his broken genius.

The “cant of Morality, like the cant of Methodism, comes in most naturally to close the scene” of Hazlitt’s demolition of the *Biographia*, revealing a stage bare of everything but the unnatural antitheses that might be called Lake Methodism. When writing the etiology of “enthusiasm,” whether “lofty,” “abstract,” or Methodistical, Hazlitt called this the disorder of “preternatural excitements” in body and spirit, a compulsive muta-

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90. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 61.

91. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 490.

92. Hazlitt, “Mr. Coleridge’s Lay Sermon,” 116.

93. Hazlitt, “Coleridge’s *Literary Life*,” *Edinburgh Review* 28 (August 1817): 488–515 (514).

bility that, “if it takes a definite, consistent form, it loses its interest.”<sup>94</sup> In the *Biographia*, he called it “the true history of our reformed Antijacobin poets; the life of one of whom is here recorded”:

Always pampering their own appetite for excitement, and wishing to astonish others, their whole aim is to produce a dramatic effect, one way or other—to shock or delight their observers; and they are as perfectly indifferent to the consequences of what they write, as if the world were merely a stage for them to play their fantastic tricks on.—As romantic in their servility as in their independence, and equally importunate candidates for fame or infamy, they require only to be distinguished, and are not scrupulous as to the means of distinction. Jacobins or Antijacobins—outrageous advocates for anarchy and licentiousness, or flaming apostles of persecution—always violent and vulgar in their opinions, they oscillate, with a giddy and sickening motion, from one absurdity to another, and expiate the follies of their youth by the heartless vices of their advancing age. None so ready as they to carry every paradox to its most revolting and nonsensical excess—none so sure to caricature, in their own persons, every feature of an audacious and insane philosophy:—In their days of innovation, indeed, the philosophers crept at their heels like hounds, while they darted on their distant quarry like hawks; stooping always to the lowest game; eagerly snuffing up the most tainted and rankest scents; feeding their vanity with the notion of the strength of their digestion of poisons, and ostentatiously avowing whatever would most effectually startle the prejudices of others.<sup>95</sup>

Hazlitt figured the extremities of cultural capital—whether named by Coleridge’s “grace that would enable us to take up vipers,” Bourdieu’s “audacious imposture of refusing all refusals,” or his own sense of the vain “strength” which came from the “digestion of poisons”—as the agents of lethally misrecognized political power. The insatiable “appetite for excitement” wasn’t just a fleshly craving, but an ideological instinct for absolutism in all its forms. Coleridge’s output of 1816–18, so diffuse, inconclusive, and mislabeled, was in this view all the more tyrannical for its subversion of rhetorical and social regulation. While the *Lay Sermons* reserved the “*Jus divinum*” for “the Scriptures alone” (LS 33), they appropriated some of that divine right for themselves, troping an end-

94. Hazlitt, “On the Causes of Methodism,” 57, 61.

95. Hazlitt, “Coleridge’s *Literary Life*,” 514–15.

less empire that contained multitudes—that alone could level the division between Methodist and “cleric,” Sage and Sibyl—and that made meaningless any resistance to its dominion, reinventing the enthusiasms of bad thinking, bad writing, and bad faith as the inevitable reinforcements of its own power.

## “The Bible the Best Guide”

Hazlitt worried that enthusiastic confusion, not forceful differentiation, was now the weapon of reaction. The *Lay Sermons* were dangerous because they seemed so absurd, trading the crude polemics of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge for an insidiously subtle hierarchalism. While it’s true that Hazlitt was “politically suspicious of the hedonism of the poetic voice,” alarm at Coleridge’s secret ministerialism wasn’t his unique paranoia.<sup>96</sup> In 1844, William Mitchell outed Coleridge’s metaphysical complications as the same obfuscating agenda that had rationalized the Congress of Vienna and re-throned the House of Bourbon. Any attempt, Mitchell hissed, “to exhibit the principles of the great theologian in his own phraseology,” “scattered” as they are “in mystic paragraphs, through many volumes . . . is no small task, for, like a wary diplomatist, our poetical philosopher and divine is cautious in the disclosure of his sentiments, acting somewhat upon the saying of Talleyrand, that ‘the great object of speech is to conceal the thought.’”<sup>97</sup> By the 1810s, Coleridge’s “authoritarian cultural politics” had come to lurk, argues Nigel Leask, “in the literal ‘mystification’ of authority,” patterned after the ancient Mystery cults that demystified Roman religion for the imperial elite, secreting “esoteric” doctrine within outward-facing rituals.<sup>98</sup> This mystification, I think, is the best explanation for the conflicted modes of reading and writing the *Lay Sermons* modeled. The enthusiasms the *Sermons* brazened were more than skin deep—but they were also motivated diversions from Coleridge’s most reactionary positions, which unfolded with a nudge, wink, and code-word to the wise in place of exposition.

The politics of the *Sermons* were doubly extraordinary: for their extremism, and for their plausible deniability. The first *Sermon* discov-

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96. Tim Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13.

97. Mitchell, *Coleridge and the Moral Tendency*, 9–10.

98. Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge’s Critical Thought* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1988), 4; 173.

ered the scriptural mandate for the Constitution of Church and State, in that “direct Relation of the State and its Magistracy to the Supreme Being, taught as a vital and indispensable part of all moral and of all political wisdom.” This was a hint at theocratic absolutism, but Coleridge escaped explication with an allusive (and abrupt) dodge to “the latter period of the reign of Solomon, and to the revolutions in the reign of Rehoboam,” before drawing himself up short, and abandoning the argument entirely: one step more, and “I should tread on glowing embers” (*LS* 33). Hazlitt, following the thread through Coleridge’s labyrinth back to 1 Kings 11.4–43, found at its end the monster of “divine right, with a vengeance,” in the “*grand, magnificent, and gracious* answer of the Son of Solomon” to his beleaguered people, which the *Sermon* advertised, but pointedly did *not* quote: “*My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke; my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.*”<sup>99</sup> Since half-baked allusion never quite rose to argument, this was having one’s authoritarian cake and eating it, too. Coleridge’s nod at Biblically scripted tyranny took its cue from the magisterial mystery of Mitchell’s Talleyrand, a fleeting gesture of sympathy so decontextualized it might be disavowed, or even explained away as critique, rather than endorsement, of the political efficacy of yokes, whips, and scorpions.

The *Lay Sermons* were steeling “the Higher and Middle Classes of Society” for the brutality required to preserve the liberty of property in the Armageddon signaled by “the existing Distresses and Discontents”—but so quietly that this ideological hardening would remain undetectable to its victims. Yet this was an ostentatious circumspection, confident that the cipher was secure against anyone without the socioeconomically determined key. The murderously practical conclusions of the “*Jus divinum*” might have been buried in that speech of Rehoboam, but the surfaces of the *Sermons* hid blood and iron, as well. The phrases the *Sermons* took as their texts—“*The Bible the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight*” for the first, “*Blessed are ye that sow beside all Waters*” for the second—were political dog-whistles, pitched beyond the range of most readers.

Even Hazlitt seems not to have caught completely the tone of the first. He wondered only, if the Bible were indeed the Best Guide, why Coleridge “has not brought forward a single illustration of his doctrine, nor referred to a single example in the Jewish history that bears at all, in the circumstances, or the inference, on our own”?<sup>100</sup> Text *was* argument, however,

99. Hazlitt, “Mr. Coleridge’s Statesman’s Manual,” in *Works* 7:123.

100. Hazlitt, “Mr. Coleridge’s Statesman’s Manual,” in *Works* 7:120.

invoking a long tradition of English (rather than Jewish) “illustrations,” for those in the know. “*The Bible the Best Guide*” had been shorthand for the doctrines of “passive obedience” and “nonresistance” since James II, summarizing the sort of extreme, High Church Toryism for which Henry Sacheverell was prosecuted in 1710. Even after the decline of Jacobitism, the ultra-orthodox flocked to the phrase. In 1776, William Mason insisted that the “the Bible our guide in government” should teach the American colonies “passive obedience and nonresistance.”<sup>101</sup> Sarah Trimmer agreed in 1789 with Mason’s catechism that “the bible . . . our best rule in *politics*” made revolution heretical, since “every creature is placed in its station by GOD,”<sup>102</sup> while, in a truth stranger than fiction, Hannah More named her two cats “Passive Obedience” and “Non Resistance.”<sup>103</sup>

Coleridge was preaching to the choir a sermon so uncompromising the congregation might have grown restless, had they been able to understand it. Following Hazlitt’s early review of the title and text of the first *Sermon*, the second *Sermon* protected itself against similarly unwelcome (mis)understandings. Text and title were now set as traps for the uninitiated, dividing sheep from goats—those intense readers, admitted to inner secrets, from the superficial herd precipitating the nation toward slaughter. As the *Monthly Magazine* observed, without quite seeing, this *Lay Sermon* was oddly indifferent to itself:

Mr. Coleridge, adopting a scriptural expression, says, “*Blessed are ye that sow beside all waters*”; this is his text—at least his *motto*—no reference to which is made, that we can perceive, throughout his discourse. Now this, we think, is a clear proof that the lay-preacher is not quite an adept in the selection of texts[.]<sup>104</sup>

The *Monthly*’s irony hit home, and missed the mark entirely. The *Sermon* did indeed drop this line from Isaiah after its first paragraphs, only return-

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101. William Mason, *The Absolute and Indispensable Duty of Christians, in this Critical Juncture* (London: Pasham, 1776), 16, 9.

102. Sarah Trimmer, *Comment on Dr. Watts’s Divine Songs for Children, with Questions; Designed to Illustrate the Doctrine and Precepts to which they Refer; And Induce a proper application of them as instruments in early Piety* (London: J. Buckland, J. F. and C. Rivington, T. Longman, T. Field, and C. Dilly, 1789), 16.

103. J. C. D. Clark, *English Society*, 299. As Susan Wolfson has observed to me, these names were either tribute to improbably well-behaved cats, or practical testaments to More’s conviction that no amount of regulation would be sufficient to curb the disobedient spirit, feline or plebeian.

104. “Critical Notices of New Books,” *Monthly Magazine and British Reader* 43 (May 1817): 354.



ing to it in the last sentence. But amateurish disorder, Coleridge confided a few pages after the *Monthly* appears to have stopped reading, was just a shell game to take in rubes: exactly the sort of sleight of hand one might expect from “an adept” prestidigitator of mystified truths. For the casually curious—say, for the “READING PUBLIC” that knew the *Sermons* only by periodical review and critical summary—the “*Blessed are ye*” was a bit of trifling exoterica, patronizing the alien with its own exclusion:

Easy to be remembered from its briefness, likely to be remembered from its beauty, and with not a single word in it which the malignant ingenuity of Faction could pervert to the excitement of any dark or turbulent feeling, I chose it both as a Text and Title of this Discourse, that it might be brought under the eye of many thousands who will know no more of the Discourse itself than what they read in the advertisements in our public papers. (LS 140)

But the elect—or, at least, those who read beyond the first few pages—were permitted to glimpse another face. It was, “in point of fact,” another “passage of Scripture, the words of another Prophet, that originally occasioned this Address” (LS 140). In its fourth paragraph, the second *Sermon* swapped Isaiah for Jeremiah, esoterically adopting a new text unconnected with the title, unannounced in advertisement, unnoticed by hasty reviewers, and substantially more extreme in moral crisis and material cure: “*We looked for Peace, but no good came: for a time of health, and behold, trouble! The harvest is past, the summer is ended: and we are not saved. Is there no balm in Gilead?*” (LS 141) The tonal gap between the anodyne Isaiah (“*Blessed are ye*”) and the grim Jeremiah (“*behold, trouble!*”) performed the political gap the *Sermon* contemplated, rousing the better sorts to a sense of their own peril, while soothing the rest back into convenient torpor. This prophetic reversal was the balm Coleridge prescribed in Gilead, 1817: not a display of naked force, but the “gentle and unnoticed . . . controul” the *Biographia* theorized as the shape of the imagination,<sup>105</sup> and that here softly formed the hierarchy of cultural consumption, the division between those who heard the *Sermon*, and those who merely heard of it.

However “gentle,” the “controul” in these leading dead-ends and skeletal suggestions were the culminating formation of the “Sage.” This is the political logic encoded in that abstract play between the prophetically sug-

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105. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2:16–17.

gestive Writer and the academic reader who completed him, which transforms rhetorical sympathy into a program for class solidarity. But in the enthusiastic gamesmanship of the *Sermons*, the security of such screening was porous, and orthodoxy opened to admit its own inversion. “*The Bible the Best Guide*” was a shibboleth the Tory rump shared with less well-behaved zealots. Its wholesale repudiation of secularized politics was as likely to end in spiritual revolt as the evangelical discipline of the *Cheap Repository Tracts*. Wesley, Southey warned, “had broken through the forms of [the] Church, and was acting in defiance of her authority” out of a critically unsound faith, which dismissed all institutional managers other than the Bible—not just the Best, but the Only Guide: “This irregularity he justified, by a determination to allow no other rule of faith, or practice, than the Scriptures; not, perhaps, reflecting that in this position he joined issue with the wildest religious anarchists.”<sup>106</sup> In the reflection of this “irregularity,” Coleridge’s slogan was the double-image of both purifying “determination” and unlicensed tumult, a dark warning on the tendency of Protestantism’s rigorous interiority to devolve into a de-socialized spirituality. The Bible, the prophet Richard Brothers insisted in 1794, unmade the forms of this world, a holy overturning without appeal:

As the SCRIPTURE is the only great Fountain of Knowledge, or Book of written Truth in the World; as it contains the sacred Records of those Things which GOD has predetermined shall be hereafter—as well as those which have been already; and as it contains the History of our own Creation, with that of every thing besides, It alone, in preference to any Man’s opinion, ought to be, without the least doubt, freely believed and confidently depended on.<sup>107</sup>

As we’ll see in the next chapter, Brother’s “free belief” and “confident dependence” would lead to treason, prophetic regicide, and prison. Bibliolatry was a habit of antinomians and anti-Jacobins alike. Coleridge’s ostensibly bland motto was the doctrinal armature for the *ancien regime*, as well as its complete revision in spite of “any Man’s opinion.”

The original versions of the *Sermons* relished this ambiguity, vesting the *Biographia*’s exordium to “the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” in socially specific form.<sup>108</sup> Secure divisions were

106. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 1:235.

107. Richard Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge, of the Prophecies and Times, Book the First* (London, 1794 [revised and expanded 1794–95]), 2.

108. *Biographia Literaria* 2:16–17.

the epiphenomena of deeper insecurities, and *The Statesman's Manual* gamely played proper and improper appeals to Biblical authority off each other. Coleridge welcomed an enthusiastic faith “in predictions which are permanent prophecies, because they are at the same time eternal truths”: such conviction was infinitely preferable to the cold calculations of political economists and mathematical utilitarians, “the guesses of state-gazers, the dark hints and open reviling of our self-inspired state fortune-tellers, ‘the wizards, that peep and mutter’ and forecast, alarmists by trade, and malcontents for their bread” (*LS* 7–8). This sentiment wasn’t beyond the pale—it was the same impeccable suspicion Burke held for the “sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators” dead to the charms of chivalry and Marie Antoinette.<sup>109</sup> But Coleridge unsettled his prophetic politics, approaching the limit of reasonable Christianity set by the Doctrine of the Cessation of Miracles—and then crossing it irrevocably, into a “self-inspired” condition worse than that of any “state-gazer.”

To be sure, an assertion that “the Prophet Isaiah revealed the true philosophy of the French revolution more than two thousand years before it became a sad irrevocable truth of history” would provoke only grunts of agreement from High Churchmen after the 1790s (*LS* 34). The doctrinal implications of this claim were safely delimited. This was only an argument that the prophet had disclosed the principle that certain moral tendencies and intellectual errors led to destruction—not a ludicrous declaration that Isaiah had foreseen 1789 as a specific instance of the general cause, since “a sad irrevocable truth of history” was pointedly not a “truth” of Revelation. But after the bait came the switch. Coleridge next suggested that with the words “*Therefore shall evil come upon thee, thou shalt know from whence it riseth,*” the prophet had forecast Napoleon’s weather along with his philosophy:

The Reader will scarcely fail to find in this verse a remembrancer of the sudden setting-in of the frost, a fortnight before the usual time (in a country, too, where the commencement of its two seasons is in general scarcely less regular than that of the wet and dry seasons between the tropics) which caused, and the desolation which accompanied, the flight from Moscow. The Russians, baffled the *physical* forces of the imperial Jacobin, because they were inaccessible to his *imaginary* forces. The faith in St. Nicholas kept off at safe distance the more pernicious superstition of the Destinies of Napoleon the Great. (*LS* 34–35)

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109. Burke, *Reflections*, 170.

Though hedged as “remembrancer” rather than “prophecy,” this was very close to that delusive faith in the meddling of “Special Providence” in the daily lives of men, which many theologians were extraordinarily careful to forbid, even as they defended the ineffably distant mechanisms of the “General Providence.”

For respectable students of prophecy inside and outside the Church, the Scriptures revealed philosophical axioms, never current events. Paley’s *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, an examination text at the Universities, set the terms: “Whoever expects to find in the Scripture a specific direction for every moral doubt that arises, looks for more than he will meet with.”

Morality is taught in Scripture in this wise. General rules are laid down of piety, justice, benevolence, and purity . . . this is in truth the way in which all practical sciences are taught, as Arithmetic, Grammar, Navigation, and the like—Rules are laid down, and examples subjoined; not that these examples are the cases, much less the cases which will actually occur, but by way only of explaining the principles of the rule, and as so many specimens of the method of applying it.<sup>110</sup>

The local specificity in which Coleridge indulged with his “remembrancer,” insinuating a modern “case” within Scriptural “principles,” was the most prominent sociodoctrinal attribute of the prophecies of Brothers and Southcott. Ian Balfour finds the “point of such a citation is to suggest ultimately that Coleridge’s analysis of contemporary politics and matters of philosophy coincides with God’s own,” which is true enough.<sup>111</sup> But contextualized within the denominational identities of the early nineteenth century, Coleridge’s political “analysis” was nothing of the sort. Churchmen were very guarded in presuming direct evidence for God’s approbation, and this “remembrancer” anticipated an outcome gratifying to the Establishment in terms the Establishment couldn’t accept. The resulting fantasy of enthusiasm and orthodoxy was an ideological solecism, imagining a cosmos of reactionary Providential intention and intercession, even as claims for such easily identifiable spiritual agency—regardless of political agenda—offended normative Anglicanism.

The *Lay Sermons* were a high-wire act of precariously balanced enthusiasms, and ultimately, they fell back to earth. Immediately after publi-

110. William Paley, *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, 12th ed., 3 vols. (London: R. Faulder, 1791), 1:6–7.

111. Balfour, *Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, 263.

cation, Coleridge recanted most of the transferences that have been my subject. The marginalia in Coleridge's presentation copies retreated from the prophetic amalgamations of Sage and Sibyl, qualifying, excusing, and often simply crossing-out problematic passages. As early as December 5, 1816, Coleridge was nervously noting to Brabant (Copy *B*) that though *The Statesman's Manual* trumpeted "facts" that were "distinguished . . . from all other facts by especial manifestation of divine inter-ference," he didn't mean to suggest that such facts had contemporary relevance, as he had implied with Napoleon's "remembrancer." The Bible was a political guide, but its insight was located in the orthodox principles Paley emphasized, not the "facts" of "manifestation" or "interference": because they were "divine," they were "for this very reason totally unfit to furnish a ground of action under any existing circumstance" (*LS 9a*). Coleridge didn't clarify his most opaque conservatism—the full text of Rehoboam's outburst would never see the light of day—but his codicils and outright excisions precisely track the enthusiasms of both *Sermons*, disappearing almost every instance of the doctrinal eccentricities that had so exercised his contemporaries.

Sound piety succeeded Methodistical exuberance. Copy *A* (John Anster's) now calmly supported the Cessation of Miracles, since "We (it may be said) no longer live under a miraculous dispensation similar to that recorded in the Bible" (*LS 9d–e*). Both Copies *B* and *CL* (Charles Lamb's) struck out an earlier vision of prophetic Eolism, which had cast all human "agents" as "but surges of the same tide, passive conductors of the one invisible influence, under which the total host of billows, in the whole line of successive impulse, swell and roll shoreward; there finally each in its turn, to strike, roar and be dissipated" (*LS 9b–c*). The second *Sermon* claimed that Jeremiah had "described by anticipation" the condition of England in 1817, "with such historic precision, so plain and so specifically as to render all comment needless, all application superfluous." Coleridge and his nephew seem to have come to consider any "comment" on "such historic precision" in prophecy truly "needless." The argument, and the very long passage surrounding it, was wordlessly deleted in Coleridge's own copy and in that of 1839 (*LS 141a–b*).<sup>112</sup>

Even in their original forms, Coleridge's prophetic experiments had often been self-consciously constrained. His hearing of an explicit warning from Revelations against Henry Hunt, William Cobbett, and other "mob-orators," was mischievously unsure:

112. Cf. *On the Constitution of Church and State and Lay Sermons*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, 328.

But I had dared to imitate the major part of the Commentators, and followed the *fatuous fires* of FANCY, that ‘shrewd sprite’ ever busiest when in the service of pre-conceived partialities and antipathies, I might have suffered my judgment to be seduced by the wonderful (*apparent*) aptness of the symbols, (many of them at least) and extended the application of the first eleven verses to the whole chapter, the former as treating of the Demagogues exclusively, the latter as including their infatuated followers likewise. For what other images, concorporated according to the rules of Hieroglyphic Syntax, could form more appropriate and significant exponents of a seditious and riotous multitude, with the mob-orators, their *Heads* or Leaders, than the thousands of pack-horses (*jumenta sarcinaria*) with *heads* resembling those of a roaring wild beast, with smoke, fire and brimstone (that is, empty, unintelligible, incendiary, calumnious, and offensively foul language) issuing from the mouths? (*LS* 146–47)

Coleridge’s “Syntax” was as “Hieroglyphic” as the Revelator’s. This is a confusing preteritio of assertion and parenthetical reservation, canceling enthusiasm in a wry grimace at its lunacy: “had I dared” (as he did not) “to imitate” the “*fatuous fires* of FANCY,” which should not be mistaken for the creative fires of real inspiration, and which only illuminate “pre-conceived” prejudice rather than truth, he might in such dim light mistake “(*apparent*) aptness” for “wonderful” signs, “(many of them at least)” pointing toward something genuinely universal. This sort of regulation was at least as exuberant as the enthusiasm it “disciplined,” and it didn’t comport with the model of sagely self-reflection Henry Nelson Coleridge brought to market some decades later. Though the older Coleridge hadn’t marked the passage for comment or revision, it vanished from the 1839 text completely. All that survived was an orthodoxy confining Revelation firmly to the dust of history, in a footnote forcibly migrated to modify an entirely different passage, with no record of the lost referent: “My own conception of the Book is, that it narrates in the broad and inclusive form of the ancient Prophets (i.e. in the prophetic power of faith and moral insight irradiated by inspiration) the successive struggles and final triumph of Christianity over the Paganism and Judaism of the then Roman Empire” (*LS* 147).<sup>113</sup>

The 1839 edition, silently adopting many of these revisions, would supplant the 1816–17 texts for the rest of the century. Shedd imported

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113. See *On the Constitution of Church and State and Lay Sermons*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, 330.

Henry Nelson Coleridge's version without editorial comment, standardizing for international study a text "as distinct and unmistakable as the Gulf-Stream in the Atlantic."<sup>114</sup> The "Coleridge" I've attempted to recover faded from view, or at least into other, more reputable scandals: better a plagiarism from Schelling than Southcott. Regency indictments, their evidence revised into thin air, might seem themselves unhinged, the phatic noise of the "READING PUBLIC." Critique now rebounded on critic, as both Shedd and Henry Nelson Coleridge brought James Marsh's dictum out of the wilderness of Vermont, into the canon: "I have no fear that any earnest and single-hearted lover of truth as it is in Jesus . . . will find any cause of offence, or any source of alarm."<sup>115</sup> The disappearing act pulled off by the Sage and his clerisy was impressive. But it was amateurish next to the one pulled on the Sibyl.

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114. Shedd, "Introductory Essay," 11.

115. *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Shedd, 1:71. Shedd reprinted James Marsh's 1829 "Preliminary Essay" to *Aids to Reflection* in his own 1853 edition, as did H. N. Coleridge in the fourth edition of 1836.