

The Poetry of Coleridge

Numéro d'inventaire : 2010.07773

Auteur(s) : Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Ralph Richardson

Howard O. Sackler

Type de document : disque

Collection : Caedmon Literary series TC 1092

Inscriptions :

- marque : Caedmon
- étiquette : au dos de la pochette : Distributeur : Disques Pléiade, 8, rue de Berri, Paris-8e

Matériau(x) et technique(s) : vinyle

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Notes : Disque contient : - Face A : Kublan Khan, Frost at Midnight, This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison, Dejection : an Ode, - Face B : The Rime of The Ancient Mariner.

Mots-clés : Anglais

Autres descriptions : Langue : anglais



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THE POETRY OF COLERIDGE

Kubla Khan • *Frost at Midnight* • *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*
Dejection: an Ode • *The Ancient Mariner*

Read by

SIR RALPH RICHARDSON

Directed by

Howard O. Sackler

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THERE HAVE BEEN POETS far more prolific than Coleridge, but few who have exerted a greater influence upon the course of English poetry. The names of Coleridge and Wordsworth are synonymous with the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century; but had it not been for the stimulus of the Coleridge mind, imaginative, far-ranging, profoundly learned and ever questing, there would never have been created the *Lyrical Ballads*, that impetus to an entire new spirit in literature. "The Ancient Mariner," which first appeared in the small volume, was the result of a plan, "in which it was agreed," wrote Coleridge, "that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."

That he himself drew the supernatural part of the assignment, while Wordsworth concerned himself with poems of ordinary life, was in keeping with Coleridge's nature. There was a darkness in it. Moody and deeply philosophical, he trafficked eagerly with the spirits of the mind. Melancholy seized him often, and it was probably a combination of depression and intellectual curiosity which led him into the drug-taking habit. As is well-known, the strange "Kubla Khan" was the phantom of a drugged dream, here described by the puzzled poet:

"In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in 'Purchas's Pilgrimage': 'Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.' The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!"

Coleridge himself disclaimed "Kubla Khan" as poetry, because of its peculiarly automatic composition. Yet he must have realized that this was not only a valid poem, but one of the most beautiful in his power to create—an irony surely not lost on him in his more depressed moods.

Yet he could be wonderfully ebullient as well. Coleridge was not only a lively conversationalist, but an insatiable one as well. With anyone

willing to listen, he could talk interminably; and so brilliant was the man ("Coleridge was the only person," said Wordsworth, "whose intellect ever astonished me") that he numbered among his visitors and close friends such men as Southey, Charles Lamb, Carlyle, Keats, Scott and, of course, Wordsworth, whose poems had led the young Coleridge to seek him out. "My gentle-hearted Charles," addressed in the poem "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," is Charles Lamb, who, with some other friends, visited him at his cottage in June of 1797. On the very morning of their arrival, Coleridge had an accident which prevented him from walking during their sojourn; and left alone by them for a few hours one evening, he penned this poem in his garden-bower.

Throughout all of his personal tragedies, Coleridge clung to an ardent love of nature—not as the capitalized spirit that Wordsworth envisioned, but as one glorious aspect of the Almighty. Long after his loveliest poetry had been written, he continued to see and write in images of beauty drawn from nature. There is a wistful, and highly revealing, passage in his *Biographia Literaria*, disclosing the course he might have preferred to follow:

"At a very premature age, even before my fifteenth year, I had bewildered myself in metaphysics, and in theological controversy. Nothing else pleased me. History, and particular facts, lost all interest in my mind. Poetry (though for a school-boy of that age, I was above par in English versification, and had already produced two or three compositions which, I may venture to say, without reference to my age, were somewhat above mediocrity, and which had gained me more credit than the sound, good sense of my old master was at all pleased with,) poetry itself, yea, novels and romances, became insipid to me. In my friendless wanderings on our leavedays, (for I was an orphan, and had scarcely any connections in London,) highly was I delighted, if any passenger, especially if he were dressed in black, would enter into conversation with me. For I soon found the means of directing it to my favorite subjects

'Of providence, fore-knowledge, will, and fate,
Fix'd fate, free will, fore-knowledge absolute,
And found no end in wandering mazes lost.'

This preposterous pursuit was, beyond doubt, injurious both to my natural powers, and to the progress of my education. It would perhaps have been destructive, had it been continued; but from this I was auspiciously withdrawn, partly indeed by an accidental introduction to an amiable family, chiefly however, by the genial influence of a style of poetry, so tender and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so dignified and harmonious, as the sonnets &c. of Mr. Bowles! Well were it for me, perhaps, had I never relapsed into the same mental disease; if I had continued to pluck the flower and reap the harvest from the cultivated surface, instead of delving in the unwholesome quicksilver mines of metaphysical depths. But if in after time I have sought a refuge from bodily pain and mismanaged sensibility in abstruse researches, which exercised the strength and subtlety of the understanding without awakening the feelings of the heart; still there was a long and blessed interval, during which my natural faculties were allowed to expand, and my original tendencies to develop themselves: my fancy, and the love of nature, and the sense of beauty in forms and sounds."

COLERIDGE — SIR RALPH RICHARDSON

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