Summer 6-1-1989

Unwitnessed by Answering Deeds: 'The Destiny of Nations' and Coleridge's Sibylline Leaves

Gary Dyer

Cleveland State University, g.dyer@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub

Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Publisher's Statement

Article originally published as Dyer, Gary, "Unwitnessed by Answering Deeds: 'The Destiny of Nations' and Coleridge's Sibylline Leaves," *The Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer 1989): 148-155.

Recommended Citation

Dyer, Gary, "Unwitnessed by Answering Deeds: 'The Destiny of Nations' and Coleridge's Sibylline Leaves" (1989). *English Faculty Publications*. 22.

https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub/22

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Unwitnessed by Answering Deeds: “The Destiny of Nations” and Coleridge’s *Sibylline Leaves*

Gary Dyer

University of Pennsylvania

Coleridge explains in the preface that the title to *Sibylline Leaves*, the 1817 volume that includes most of Coleridge’s poetry up to that date, is “in allusion to the fragmentary and widely scattered state in which [the poems] have been long suffered to remain,” (p. i).¹ Like Wordsworth’s 1815 *Poems*, this first collective edition of Coleridge’s poetry is arranged not in order of composition or publication but by genre, subject, and importance—both individually and to the collection.²

The title Coleridge chooses is more assertive than such comparably inclusive volumes as Wordsworth’s *Poems* or Scott’s 1820 *Miscellaneous Poetry* (Fraistat, pp. 26ff). It evokes Aeneas’s plea to the Sibyl of Cumae: “Only trust not thy verses to leaves, lest they fly in disorder, the sport of rushing winds; chant them thyself, I pray” (*Aeneid*, vi, 74-76, trans. Fairclough [1974]). The book, then, is meant as Coleridge’s gathering and codification of his vatic effusions into the most coherent, ordered body that these “fragmentary” poems can form. “The whole is now presented to the reader collectively, with considerable additions and alterations, and as perfect as the author’s judgment and powers could render them,” writes Coleridge (p. ii). Neil Fraistat comments: “As Coleridge expected his reader to know, to piece together the scattered leaves of the Sibyl is to discover the contents of a prophecy. Indeed, the chance to build a poetic whole from disparate ‘fragments’—to fashion, to adapt Coleridge’s term, a kind of unity from multiteity—had special significance for the Romantics, who were themselves exploring the meaning of life within a whole that seemed increasingly fragmented” (p. 20). The important question, then, is how prophetic, how recovered, and how unified are these leaves. Probably many of Coleridge’s readers were skeptical, and the reviewers noted the allusion in the title only to abuse the poet with it—for example, as George Croly wrote in the *Literary Gazette*:

On refreshing our classic memory we grasp the very essence and soul of this mysterious title. The Sibyl wrote her prophecies on leaves; so does Mr. Coleridge his verses—the prophecies of the Sibyl became incomprehensible, if not instantly gathered; so does the sense of Mr. Coleridge’s poetry; the Sibyl asked the same price from Tarquin for her books when in 9, 6, and 3 volumes; so does Mr. Coleridge for his, when scattered over sundry publications, and now as collected into one—as soon as the Sibyl had concluded her bargain she vanished, and was seen no more in the regions of Cumae; so does Mr. Coleridge assure us he will be seen no more on Parnassus—the Sibylline books were preserved by Kings, had a College of Priests to take care of them, and were so esteemed by the people, that they were very seldom consulted; even so does Mr. Coleridge look to delight Monarchs, his book will be treasured by the Eleven Universities, and we venture to suppose that it will be treated by the public, quoad frequent perusal, pretty much in the same way with the ravings of his Archetypes (Reiman, ed. *The Romantics Reviewed* [1972], Part A, pp. 590)

Several aspects of *Sibylline Leaves* are worth study—its relation to the book that grew out of its preface, the *Biographia Literaria*; contemporary reaction to the collection; and the influence it had on the received views of Coleridge’s poetry—but the central issue, which receives much of my attention here, is the contrast between, on the one hand, Coleridge’s attempt to fix the canon of his works and, on the other, the fragmentary quality of not only some of the poems but the collection itself. To some extent *Sibylline Leaves*, notably with its fragmentary final poem, “The Destiny of Nations,” plays up this conflict. The title of the book asks the reader to expect prophecy and fragmentation, and what follows does not disappoint: many poems have visionary aspects, and five poems are denoted fragments. In theory fragmentation can aid prophetic poetry, for the formal incompleteness of a poem can figure its tempo-

ral incompleteness, thereby suggesting that its fulfillment is yet to come. If *Sibylline Leaves* itself is but a fragment of Coleridge's output, as the poet acknowledges in the preface, then the explicit imperfection of the book might anticipate the day when all the leaves will be gathered. Coleridge, however, effectively rules out such possibilities. His preface makes it clear that "henceforward the author must be occupied by studies of a very different kind" (p. iii), and a collection of sibylline leaves cannot conclude more forcefully than when the poet-prophet announces he will add no more to them. The fragmentary poems here will also remain as they are. Absent are the fragments "Christabel" and "Kubla Khan," and "The Pains of Sleep," which were published together in 1816—after most of *Sibylline Leaves* had been printed, so their exclusion from this book was almost certainly purposeful.³ When Coleridge says in his preface that the only poems he has written since 1796 that are left out are the ones he has not finished, he implies that he will never complete the fragments he includes; unlike with "Kubla Khan," in this book the poet does not hope to sing on a brighter day.

We shall first look at the design of *Sibylline Leaves* and its models, then see how "The Destiny of Nations" ends the book by foreshadowing only the continuation of the poet's prophetic tradition. The apparent dichotomy between the design and the incompleteness is, I suggest, intentional, the incompleteness being part of the larger design, and the position of the incomplete "Destiny" at the end is essential to this scheme. While much of this poem appeared in Book II of Southey's *Joan of Arc* in 1796, and part appeared in the *Morning Post* in 1797 as "The Visions of the Maid of Orleans: A Fragment," the first appearance of this fuller version was in *Sibylline Leaves*.⁴ Because meaning changes with context (and hence no one can say the same thing twice), Coleridge by publishing in 1817 what he wrote years before reauthorizes the old text, in effect rewriting it, even if he does not change a word. The work will be read differently from the way he originally intended, as of course he knows. We are dealing here with two distinct poetic acts—perhaps an obvious point, but one of particular interest because in *Sibylline Leaves* Coleridge obscures the fact that "Destiny" is an act among acts when he leaves the social and political background against which the text is to be interpreted so vague that the work seems to refer only to its own formal processes. Coleridge's poem in its original historical context clearly encourages revolution, but in *Sibylline Leaves* the poet endangers its polemical power, in part because by indicating that the fragments included *never* will be finished he announces that we, his readers, never will know what prophecy we are being called upon to effect. By proclaiming the structural and philosophical irresolution of the poem finished, by declining to complete and clarify the prophecy, the poet refuses to decide anything for the reader, who is encouraged not to act on this text but at most only to continue the prophetic tradition.

In effect Coleridge relies on our tendency to read fragments as complete and intentional, for we thereby take the poem out of its historical context, and the reading that results belongs, appropriately, to the kind of idealism we call Romantic, which is to say that the response of the hypothetical 1817 reader to *Sibylline Leaves* can be seen in retrospect as an example of the fate of Romantic poetry generally. Jerome McGann and others have attacked the tendency of criticism to see culturally-determined beliefs of the period as revelations of transhistorical truth—which in this case means granting Coleridge a victory over the vicissitudes of history that he wanted but no human being can achieve. The poet takes advantage of the constitutive function of reading: his proclamations that the book and the poem that ends it are incomplete do not prevent the reader from reading fragments as wholes, as we always tend to do; indeed, we read a work as complete and intentional far beyond what external evidence there is of intended structure. In this way Coleridge's irresolution, which was a real problem for him when he still hoped to finish the poem, becomes the reader's closure: the reader reformulates into cohesion formal, philosophical, and political dilemmas that the historical poet did not solve. Our job as critical readers is to reconstruct the unidealized state of the poem.⁵

To reenact the 1817 reader's response to "the Destiny of Nations" is not enough; we continually must force on ourselves the knowledge that composing a poem is an act, and that this poetic act was left incomplete. Reading a verse fragment (or any utterance) as an organic whole is an ideologically-determined procedure, in large part inherited from the Romantics themselves, a procedure that nevertheless cannot prevent us from constructing antithetical readings, as a step toward seeing the work in terms of the social actuality to which it responds. As Fraistat suggests, "the chance to build a poetic whole from disparate 'fragments' " is a form of the Romantic project of "fashion[ing], to adapt Coleridge's term, a kind of unit from multiplicity" in "a world that seemed increasingly fragmented," and by restoring the fragmentation to "The Destiny of Nations" and *Sibylline Leaves* we begin to restore the fragmentation to the poet's world.

The historical significance of the 1817 volume cannot be doubted; it was the first publication in a book of such indispensable works as "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" and "Dejection: An Ode," and here many other poems, notably "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," reached or approached their final forms; both the general heading "Sibylline Leaves" and the groupings of the poems are retained in almost all editions of Coleridge's work in the rest of the nineteenth century. The book is divided into seven sections, each demarcated by a separate title page, if we disregard the three poems—"Time, Real and Imaginary," "The Raven," and "Mutual Passion"—that were printed late and tacked-on at the beginning along with Coleridge's preface and errata list. Three poems, "The Rime of the Ancient

Mariner," "Fire, Famine, and Slaughter," and "The Three Graves," have their own title pages, and the fifty-five remaining poems are grouped under four general headings, "Poems Occasioned by Political Events or Feelings Connected with Them," "Love-Poems," "Meditative Poems in Blank Verse," and "Odes and Miscellaneous Poems" ("The Foster-Mother's tale" follows "The Ancient Mariner" without a break, probably because it follows that poem in the *Lyrical Ballads*.) The book begins, if we ignore the three added poems, with "The Ancient Mariner" and ends with the last of the "Miscellaneous Poems," "The Destiny of Nations: A Vision," which is, appropriately, both prophetic and fragmentary.

The troubling question concerns how well the collection reflects Coleridge's intentions. Signs of the book's haphazard printing abound: the three poems were added before page one, thereby displacing "The Ancient Mariner" from the opening; there is no frontispiece, no dedication, no table of contents. George Whalley writes:

Sibylline Leaves was prepared under conditions that made it difficult for him to collect all his poems for review and arrangement; important unpublished poems could not be included; the book was two years in the press without any chance of revision; one of the elaborate critical prefaces which was promised for this collection and might have given shape to this and later editions grew into *Biographia Literaria* . . . and the other as far as we know was never begun—the only preface is brief and perfunctory and of no critical substance. (p. 11)

To Whalley, "the arrangement is not thoroughly thought through" (p. 17). Surely Whalley is wrong, however, to emphasize how "Coleridge in collecting and arranging his poems" was not "as resolutely (or perversely) ingenious as Wordsworth, or as fastidiously aware of an emergent thematic structure as a Yeats was" (p. 19). Wordsworth's concern for the total form of his poetic output, which he likened to a cathedral in the Preface to *The Excursion*, may be the unequalled example of such ambitions, but Coleridge certainly had his eyes on posterity as well. He had planned a comprehensive edition of his poems for some time, and he did not simply collect his verse but selected and arranged it as well. While Whalley quotes Coleridge's comment that "the chronological order [is] the best for arranging a poet's works" to support his argument that a modern edition should be arranged chronologically, the poet's sentiment suggests how essential it is to *Sibylline Leaves* and his other collections that in each case he did otherwise—indeed, Coleridge's dictum late in life may only indicate dissatisfaction with particular choices he had made in editing some of his own books (*Table Talk* [1835], II, 40, quoted by Whalley, p. 19). His 1796 *Poems* and 1803 *Poems* show evidence of careful arrangement, and in *Sibylline Leaves* there is method to his exclusions and inclusions.⁶ Beyond the documented certainties of *Sibylline Leaves*'s pub-

lishing and printing troubles, we can construe through the effect of the text Coleridge's intentions as he compiled it (we also can reflect critically on the construction we make). A critic who approaches the poetic volume to look at its form must not err, as Whalley does, by seeing formlessness when there is only incompleteness.

The impetus behind this book, besides Coleridge's need for money, was Wordsworth's 1815 *Poems*. The two projects developed concurrently over a long period. In a letter of May 5, 1809, Wordsworth first mentioned to his friend his ideas on "the arrangement which I mean to place [the poems] in if they are ever re-published during my lifetime." He planned to divide his works into seven sections, according to their subjects: first those poems concerning childhood and the later contemplation of it, then those on the feelings of "youth and early manhood," "natural objects and their influence on the mind," "the Naming of Places," "social and civic duties," "Maternal feeling," and old age. He explained that "The principle of the arrangement is that there should be a scale in each class and in the whole, and that each poem should be placed as to direct the Reader's attention by its position to its *primary* interest" (*ML*, I, 334-6). Coleridge at the time was panning a book that would bring together the poems from his earlier collections, his contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* and to magazines, and his unpublished works. On April 27, Coleridge had written on Thomas Longman proposing a two-volume extension of his 1803 collection that would include unpublished poetry (*CL*, III, 203-04). In his May 2, 1811, letter to Longman, Coleridge still is writing about a planned book of 360 pages of poems, almost all "new," with a thirty-page preface "relative to the principles of Poetry, which I have ever held, and in reference to myself, Mr. Southey, and Mr. Wordsworth." Coleridge suggests that when there is a second edition there should be added a second volume, "collecting my scattered poems—especially as Mr. Wordsworth means in any future Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, now sold, to publish his own separately. . ." (*CL*, III, 324).

Although Wordsworth's book when it appeared was in twelve rather than seven parts, he retained the particular categories and the general scheme he described in 1809. Coleridge in preparing his collection to some extent was answering Wordsworth, with whom he had broken in 1810; perhaps this challenge provoked him to divide his work into seven sections, but certainly it influenced him more generally in editing the book. Coleridge's more prolific friends, Wordsworth and Southey, seem to hover over *Sibylline Leaves* because of those poems, the first and the last here, that were extracted from their books. Southey has omitted Coleridge's lines from all editions of *Joan* after the second, and now Wordsworth will no longer reprint his contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads*, so in response Coleridge attempts to stand on his own, and in comparison he does so feebly. *Sibylline Leaves* for the most part lacks two character-

istics essential to the book Wordsworth envisioned in 1809: the progressive structure, moving from youth to age and from private matters to public, and the comprehensiveness of the categories—no need for such a weak rubric as “Odes and Miscellaneous Poems” in Wordsworth’s authoritative edition of his works.

What are the keys to the structure of Coleridge’s book? The allusion in his title points to its governing principle, the partial gathering of disparate texts. Coleridge’s “sibylline” model is difficult to pinpoint, although the book unquestionably draws on pagan, Hebrew, and Christian traditions. From classical sibylline prophecy several influences besides Virgil are possible, each of which involves the collection of separate prophecies or their loss. Coleridge probably had in mind, as his reviewer Croly did, the discontinuous history of the Sibylline Books that guided Rome’s leaders, and he probably knew something of the criticism surrounding the extant *Oracula Sibyllina*, actually prophecies from the Christian era gathered by a sixth-century editor, which were first published in 1545 and were translated into English in 1713.

The main prototype from Coleridge’s collection of scattered texts, however, would seem to be Biblical. The poet had accepted the view of contemporary scholarship that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, as well as the Homeric poems, were redactions of works that had evolved communally over long periods. Individual “leaves” of Coleridge’s book evoke this process; “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the first poem, does so with the aid of the glosses introduced in this edition, as Jerome McGann has demonstrated, in “The Ancient Mariner: The Meaning of the Meanings,” *The Beauty of Inflections* (1985), pp. 135–172. The various layers of authorship the 1817 “Ancient Mariner” displays together evoke the development of the scriptures—the poet nevertheless intends an effect of unity, unity that in his view the Bible gets from the consistent belief of its authors and editors. The structure of *Sibylline Leaves* is perhaps itself characteristic of prophecy: the seven sections of Coleridge’s collection (and of the volume in Wordsworth’s original plan) may allude to the seven-sealed book of John’s Apocalypse, for in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century understanding each seal protected one section of the volume (Joseph A. Wittreich, *Visionary Poetics* [1979], pp. 20–2; 40–1). The seven parts of “The Ancient Mariner,” each preceded by the poem’s title, display in microcosm the same structural principle, and we know that Coleridge could envision a book reflecting the structure of its constituent parts: he compared to an ode the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, which ends with the odic “Tintern Abbey.”⁷ He may also have been aware of scholarship that saw the Apocalypse as seven visions gathered (Wittreich, pp. 40–41).

In English literature prophecy is inextricably linked with epic, and Coleridge knew that a poetic collection may imitate the epic, as separate items become the elements of

the larger work. Although he said that a poet’s works ought to be arranged in “chronological order,” one of his reasons was that grouping poems destroys “the interest which arises from watching the progress, the maturity, and even the decay of genius” (*Table Talk* [1835], II, 280). He advocates chronological progression not arbitrarily but because it gives the volume a structure, even a story. While Coleridge refers to the life of the actual author, and Wordsworth refers to the poet’s life as it is refracted in his subjects, both focus on the growth of the poet’s mind, and conceivably both could aspire, as does Wordsworth’s long poem on that topic, to the dimensions of epic.

Unfortunately, most of the epic qualities of *Sibylline Leaves* remain no more than potential. While these sibylline leaves, properly gathered and arranged, perhaps might have filled the breach in the *oeuvre* of the most important Romantic poet who did not complete an epic poem, this book does not have enough focus or consistency to mimic such a work—although significant individual poems slip into that style. Not just the 1815 *Poems* but *The Prelude* and Southey’s five epics are challenges that Coleridge will never answer, and one sign of the centrality to his project of this thwarted ambition is “The Destiny of Nations,” which remains little more than a long visionary excerpt from another man’s epic.

“The Destiny of Nations” depicts visions granted to Joan of Arc that demand the liberation not so much of France from the English as of humanity from “Rebels from God, and Tyrants o’er Mankind” (314–5). While the poem would have obvious polemical force in 1796 and 1797, when it was published, in *Sibylline Leaves*, Coleridge does not supply a date for it, as he does for such other 1796–98 pieces as “Ode on the Departing Year,” “France: An Ode,” “Fears in Solitude,” “Parliamentary Oscillators,” and “Fire, Famine, and Slaughter,” and he puts it at the end, away from them and the other “Poems Occasioned by Political Events.” The 1817 reader (who we can assume did not remember *Joan of Arc* in detail) thus could read “The Destiny of Nations” as a recent work, but its political meaning would be blunted because there are so few signals leading that reader to look for such import. Coleridge takes away the original historical, political context of this visionary fragment, and the emphasis shifts from *what* is prophesied to *how* the prophecy is expressed.

Depending on one’s viewpoint, the ultimate position can either give the poem prominence or de-emphasize it by making it the last of the “Miscellaneous Poems.” Coleridge had wanted “The Progress of Liberty, or the Visions of the Maid of Orleans” to *begin* his 1797 *Poems*, and in a letter to Thomas Poole (Dec. 13, 1796), he said the poem was “ready,” but in fact his “anxieties and slothfulness, acting in a combined ratio,” prevented its completion (*CL*, I, 298; I, 275; I, 329). At one point, Joseph Cottle recorded, Coleridge was going to have the incomplete poem com-

mence the book, but finally he put "Ode on the Departing Year" in its place (I, 231-32).

Before the last 190 lines of "The Destiny of Nations," which depict the visions and Joan's response to them, Coleridge puts a note explaining that "The following fragments were intended to form part of the poem when finished." there is in "The Destiny of Nations" what seems like a sound conclusion, but it is not quite at the end. Joan's tutelary spirit leaves, saying "Much hast thou seen, nor all canst understand— / But this be thy best omen— Save thy Country!" (455-6), and she responds with a paean to the "Father of Earth and Heaven," whose "Love with unrefracted ray / Beam[s] on the Prophet's purged eye" (459, 463-4), but the poem concludes, and ends *Sibylline Leaves*, with the start of another vision—a fragment, beginning and ending with a hemistich, that in form and content begs for a context:

And first a landscape rose
More wild and waste and desolate than where
The white bear, drifting on a field of ice,
Howls to her sundered cubs with piteous rage
And savage agony. (470-4)

The apparition recalls the man Joan came across earlier whose wife and children had died from the deprivations of War. The poem thus has returned to the destruction, and there is no resolution or even progress. In "Coleridge, Joan of Arc, and the Idea of Progress," Robert Sternbach comments on this five-line passage: "In *Joan of Arc* this picture of the 'present state of society' . . . is only the prelude to a greater vision, typologically magnified, of the liberation of France from the territorial ambitions of the English. But in 'The Destiny of Nations' Coleridge has lifted this passage out of its context—the original sequence of Joan's visions—and placed it, a fragment with no connection to the preceding lines, at the end of the poem . . ." In the 1817 poem the segment "becomes little more than a testimony to his dejection" (*ELH*, 46 [1979], 253).

A prophetic work typically, at least in its Hebrew and Christian forms, ends more neatly than does *Sibylline Leaves*; whatever divisions, repetitions, or contradictions, prophecy gives the sense of a conclusion. The Book of Revelation decrees the penalties for adding to or subtracting from this prophecy, then calls for Christ's return, and concludes with a prayer for the prophet's listeners. The message is anticipatory, but closed and fixed. The visionary style encountered in *Sibylline Leaves* is mainly Miltonic, and "The Destiny of Nations" is certainly in that style. But, while in *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve after the vision of man's future "hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way," Joan's tutelary Spirit shows her endless visions. A poetic volume, prophetic or not, should have a clear, strong formal closure: Wordsworth's 1815 book ends with the Intimations Ode, just as the 1798 *Lyrical Bal-*

lads ends with "Tintern Abbey" and in 1800 with "Michael"; "Religious Musings" ends both Coleridge's 1796 and 1803 *Poems*.

The ending of the book is nevertheless proleptic, if only on an abstractly formal level. The fragmented narrative line of a prophetic work can foreshadow its own continuation, according to Joseph Wittreich in *Visionary Poetics: Milton's Tradition and His Legacy*, who explains that disruption is a characteristic of John's Apocalypse, one carried over into Spenser, Milton, and Blake; linear movement "may exist within each vision, but the seven visions rather than relating to one another sequentially reiterate the same materials, each time from a different perspective, and each time adding new materials that clarify, often amplify, what has gone before" (p. 42). The repetition within a prophecy invites repetition by others, Wittreich notes: "The prophet, through the very structure of his vision, brings his audience to a new level of consciousness, investing it with a renewed capacity for vision" (p. 43). Placed in the tradition of prophetic poetry, the disruption of "The Destiny of Nations" (or of the seven sections of *Sibylline Leaves*, or of its sixty-two poems) can be read as continuity. The poem reaffirms the prophetic tradition, and invites its reader to do the same. Therefore, while Coleridge will not continue as a prophet, his reader might.

Most important to notice, though, is what the 1817 "Destiny of Nations" does *not* foreshadow: revolution; it separates vision from prefiguration as its earlier incarnations do not, and the change is symptomatic of the political shift Coleridge has undergone since the poem's inception. "Kubla Khan" splits the prophetic mode similarly, dissociating the inspired vision from the foreshadowing of the future when it foretells not the realization of what was seen but the return of the vision and the completion of the poem (although one may doubt that many readers actually expected Coleridge to finish it). It is essential to the impression *Sibylline Leaves* makes as a whole that the specific predictions in the book often have failed, belied by events: the downfall of England prophesied in "Ode to the Departing Year" (dated 1796) has not occurred, and Allston's "America to Great Britain," a poem looking forward to the union of the two countries that Coleridge reproduces here "for its moral, no less than its poetic spirit," is dated 1810—two years before the outbreak of a war that had ended only recently when Coleridge sent his poems to the printer. The predictions in these two poems would hardly offend much, at least now that they have not been fulfilled, but their inclusion does weaken the orientation of *Sibylline Leaves* toward the future.

In "The Destiny of Nations" the authority of the prophecy, and hence much of the meaning of the poem, is challenged when the poem does not live up to the belief the poet expresses that concrete action completes interpretation, justifies the visionary experience.

If there be Beings of higher class than Man,
 I deem no nobler province they possess,
 Than by disposal of apt circumstance
 To rear up kingdoms: and the deeds they prompt, Dis-
 tinguishing from mortal agency,
 They choose their mortal ministers from such states
 As still the Epic song half fears to name,
 Repelled from all the minstrelsies that strike
 The palace-roof and soothe the monarch's pride.
 And such, perhaps, the Spirit, who (if *words*
Witnessed by answering deeds may claim our faith)
 Held commune with the warrior-maid of France
 Who scourged the Invader. (127-39; my emphasis)

The factor that effects a believer's correct interpretation of prophecy is how that vision has been confirmed, and will be confirmed, in practice. What follows this passage in "The Destiny of Nations" does remove the conditionality from Coleridge's hermeneutic principle, as the spirit obviously makes use of his "nobler province," but that principle at the same time invalidates the prophecy. Although the 1817 reader knows what the historical Joan went on to do, that outcome is not shown or even directly prefigured in the rest of the poem, and the essential parallel is blurred between that girl who did vindicate the Spirit's words and the reader who might vindicate the prophetic Coleridge's. The prophecy of "Destiny" is one to be fulfilled by human action (Joan's on one level, the reader's on another), but Coleridge by publishing the poem without a conclusion reveals his own hesitation about reproducing his earlier revolutionary fervor—just as he proclaims his patriotism by giving prominent positions to "France: An Ode" and "Fears in Solitude," or by omitting the date from the anti-English "Destiny" and placing it apart from the political poems.

The questions that "Destiny" might try to answer to resolve in order to urge action are now uncertainties to be maintained. An important irresolution in the poem, one somewhat overshadowed by the fragmented ending, concerns the origin of visionary language. Coleridge's basic scheme is Platonic and Christian:

For all that meets the bodily sense I deem
 Symbolical, one mighty alphabet
 For infant minds; and we in this low world
 Placed with our backs to bright Reality,
 That we may learn with young unwounded ken
 The substance from the shadow. (18-23)

Yet in an unresolved contradiction pointed out by Sternbach (p. 252), the symbols at another point are described as products of the human mind, to be cast off when the outcome they prefigure is realized:

For Fancy is the power
 That first unsensualises the dark mind,
 Giving it new delights; and bids it swell

With wild activity; and peopling air,
 By obscure fears of Beings invisible,
 Emancipates it from the grosser thrall
 Of the present impulse, teaching Self-control,
 Till Superstition with unconscious hand
 Seat reason on her throne. (80-988)

The inconsistency lies not in the liberating apocalypse, but in the origin of the symbols—is it God or man? The entire visionary form of "The Destiny of Nations" has at its center the poet's indecisiveness as to whether the prophetic codes are God's and permanent or man's and transient. By not resolving the issue, Coleridge decides in favor of the former, because with the poem as it stands the reader will never get past the symbols; we are urged at most to praise God as Joan does, and to be the vehicle for his word. The visionary mode becomes its own justification. Coleridge ends the book by disavowing action, which the visions demand, and the incompleteness of the book becomes a call for others instead simply to follow him in prophecy. Before, action completed interpretation; now, speech or writing does. Coleridge leaves much inconclusive not just historically, as does John's apocalypse, but formally and philosophically.

In "the Destiny of Nations," issues and facts are not made consistent and there is no clear prescription for interpretation and action. This poem thus makes a radically different set of demands on the reader than the one that commences the book; in fact, the comparison suggests that while "Destiny" may call for further prophecy it protects the visionary truth of a text less successfully than "The Ancient Mariner." As McGann has noted, Coleridge wished to defend the Bible from its own inauthoritative fragmentation, and "The Ancient Mariner," particularly with the glosses added in *Sibylline Leaves*, unites its distinct authorial voices into one interpretive tradition. The events the Mariner encounters are far more ambiguous than the pious author of the marginal glosses thinks, but if the range of possible interpretations (of the albatross, the weather, etc.) is wide, the interpretive tradition started by the Mariner, the Wedding Guest, the bard, and the glossator, rapidly limits that range. In like manner, the visions of John's Apocalypse are hardly blatant in their significances, but around them has been built a tradition of interpretation, without which we would read them differently—or, rather, not be able to read them at all.

"The Destiny of Nations" supplies much less guidance. The visions Joan sees require the tutelary spirit's aid to make sense, and his comments seem relatively inadequate. If the signs in "The Ancient Mariner" are overinterpreted, those in "The Destiny of Nations" are by comparison underinterpreted.⁸ Oddly enough, Cottle and Coleridge himself found undecipherable some of the most vivid passages in the poem: Cottle commented in his 1837 *Early Recollections* that he read an early version and "at once

told him, it was all very fine, but what it was all about, I could not tell . . ."; in a late manuscript the poet wrote by line 278 that "These are very fine lines, tho' I say it, that should not; but, hang me, if I know or ever did know the meaning of them, tho' my own composition" (I, 229; E.H. Coleridge, p. 140). Poetry may be beautiful without being clear, and by publishing the poem as it stands Coleridge gives us beauty without clarity. Croly illuminated the problem of *Sibylline Leaves* perfectly (regardless of whether or not he appreciated his own insight) in his humorous parallels explicating the title: "the prophecies of the Sibyl became incomprehensible, if not instantly gathered; so does the sense of Mr. Coleridge's poetry." A sibyl's utterances must be interpreted immediately, for they are tied up in present concerns and become old news when those concerns are gone; if they are still to be read from this point on, they must be radically recontextualized in order to give them significance. Coleridge transfers meanings from the topical (and political) to the formal (and aesthetic) in "The Destiny of Nations," and to a lesser extent in *Sibylline Leaves* as a whole. The meaning of Joan's visions becomes so much more obscure than their meaningfulness that the entire poem seems self-reflexive.

Coleridge's book escapes from radicalism into not just formalism but patriotism as well, it should be noted. His title reminds the reader, as Wittreich points out, that "the oracles of the sibyls were consulted on occasions of disaster, their purpose being not to predict the future but instead to counsel men in how to avert a national danger."⁹ If indeed the allusion implies that the crisis provoking the poet confronts *England*, Coleridge thereby distinguishes the 1817 "Destiny of Nations" from its earlier incarnations. When he wrote these lines, he was a Miltonic bard prophesying a general revolution, but when he publishes them he is, like the authoress of Rome's sibylline books, a specifically national resource. Although in the 1790's Southey and he were universalist enough to choose as a heroine a woman opposing English power, in the years after Waterloo he concerns himself, most obviously in the *Lay Sermons*, with reinforcing traditional authority in English culture particularly.

As was discussed above, we in reading transform the open ending of the poem, which represents Coleridge's inability to finish the work, into closure; we thereby accept the splitting of voice from action and symbol from meaning, seeing in his poem nothing but prophetic style and implicit philosophical idealism. "The Destiny of Nations" is taken out of history, and the text—its codes, its signs, its voices—elevated to an artificial permanence. The poet's onetime problem is no longer considered a problem. As a correction, we must acknowledge the difficulty of Coleridge's work, restoring to it factors like his inability to complete an epic and, most important, his reluctance to appear sympathetic to revolution. McCann writes in regard to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner": "From our present

vantage, what we must do is inaugurate our disbelief in Coleridge's 'poetic faith'. This Romantic ideology must be seen for what it is, a historical phenomenon of European culture, generated to save the 'traditional concepts, schemes, and values' of the Christian heritage." Both "The Ancient Mariner" and "The Destiny of Nations" in their *Sibylline Leaves* versions provide for a reading inoffensive to British orthodoxy, but in different ways. The skeptical modern reader must force on the reverent consistency of the former his own unwillingness to believe, but while "The Destiny of Nations" seems contrastingly open, it turns its own form into an element of ideology that we need to get outside. According to McCann, "The Romantic concept of the creative imagination," instead of being reified, "must become for us the same sort of 'superstition' and 'delusion' which 'the grace of the Holy Mother' was to Coleridge" (p. 170). The same ought to be said of our need to understand "The Destiny of Nations" as a text or as an organic unity rather than as an act.

The Biblical form that Milton recast prevails in *Sibylline Leaves*, and the book foreshadows the line of prophets Wittreich sees being encouraged by the repetitions of prophecy. But these partially-gathered leaves of the sibyl tell us nothing as a group but that there will be other prophets. Coleridge ends up making important to the reader not specific predictions that are to be realized, but rather the literary work itself, forever unresolved and inconclusive.

NOTES

¹*Sibylline Leaves* (London, 1817). Poem lineations refer to E.H. Coleridge, ed., *Poetical Works* (1912). For bibliographical information I have used E.H. Coleridge's edition, as well as Thomas J. Wise, *A Bibliography of the Writings in Prose and Verse of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1913).

²See Neil Fraistat, *The Poem and the Book: Interpreting Collections of Romantic Poetry* (1985), pp. 4-21, and *Poems in Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections* (1986), pp. 3-17, for the methodology influencing my essay.

³On that book, see Anne Janowitz, "Coleridge's 1816 Volume: Fragment as Rubric," *SR* 24 (1985), 21-39.

⁴See David V. Erdman, "Unrecorded Coleridge Variants," *SR* 11 (1958), 143-62, for an account of the published 1797 text, and Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections; Chiefly Relating to the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1837), I, 228-32, for details of the project's development.

⁵An illustrative study of readers using interpretive conventions to make sense out of a text that only partially reflects the author's intentions is Steven Mailloux's "The Red Badge of Courage and Interpretive Conventions: Critical Response to a Maimed Text," *Studies in the Novel*, 10 (1978), 48-63. The 1817 text of "The

Destiny of Nations” does not reflect the intentions Coleridge had when he wrote it, and its publication in this incomplete and inconsistent form is analogous to unwanted editing like that performed on Crane’s book, although the poet’s “re-writing,” the real subject of this essay, has unusual authority and historical interest. According to Mailloux, the expurgated first edition of Crane’s novel “necessitates critical choices in the use of interpretive conventions, choices that force critics to ‘write’ their own texts that they call *The Red Badge of Courage*.” Most of the critics have chosen approaches that salvage the coherence of this literary work, and most of the interpretive conventions that Mailloux identifies would make us read a text as an organic whole even when the most commonly-used external criteria would remind us that it is not (as when authorial intentions have been hindered by an editor). The insistence on ignoring a text’s inconsistencies is an effect of ideology, one that we share with the audience Coleridge anticipates and one that we, in McGann’s way of thinking, need to see as ideological.

⁶George Whalley, “Coleridge’s Poetical Canon: Selection and Arrangement,” *Review of English Literature*, 7 (1966), 171-20.

⁷Nothing demonstrably prevented him from re-printing in *Sibylline Leaves* poems from his 1796 *Poems*, over which he asserts he “has no controul”; Whalley writes, “Though Coleridge refers several times to some difficulty over the 1796 *Poems*, it is never clear what the difficulty was” (p. 16). For an apologetic (and rather cryptic) account of what is included in *Sibylline Leaves*, see the letter Coleridge’s friend J.J. Morgan wrote to the printer Gutch on May 6, 1816 (*Biographia Literaria*, ed. Engell and Bate [1983], II, 286-7). It is most likely that “Kubla Khan,” “Christabel,” and “The Pains of Sleep” were left out of *Sibylline Leaves* in 1815 more because they were “unfinished” (in Coleridge’s special sense) than for any other reason. The only reason for including a poem he did not write, Washington Allston’s “America to Great Britain,” can be contextual (although Wordsworth did supply a precedent: his supposedly-definitive 1815 *Poems* includes three pieces by his sister Dorothy). Furthermore, Coleridge *did* revise the book by adding the three poems at the beginning; they apparently are the only additions he cared to make two years after the printing had begun. Regarding the structures of Coleridge’s earlier collections, see Whalley, pp. 12-4.

⁸Dating from the time of the Roman kings, the sibylline books were destroyed in a fire in 84 B.C., and the consul Curio

gathered a new batch seven years later. Augustus burned over 2,000 volumes of prophetic verse for political reasons and put the approved books in a gilded case. The books again were lost in the fire of A.D. 69. See Milton S. Terry, Preface to *The Sibylline Oracles: Translated from the Greek into English Blank Verse* (1899; rpt. 1973). The *Oracula Sibyllina* were translated by John Floyer, *The Sibylline Oracles: Translated from the Best Greek copies and compared with the sacred prophecies, especially with David and the Revelation, and with as much history as plainly shows that many of the Sibyl’s predictions are exactly fulfilled* (1713). For other commentary on the *Oracula Sibyllina* that Coleridge may have known, see also Issac Vossius, *De Sibyllinis alisque quae Christi natalem praecessere Oraculis. Accredit ejusdem responsio ad objectiones nuperae criticae sacrae* (1679); *A Vindication of the Syblline Oracles. To which are added the genuine Oracles themselves; with the ancient citations from them; in their originals, and in English* [by Sir John Floyer, corr. William Whiston] and a few brief notes, by M. Whiston (1715).

⁹CL, I (1956), 412: “The volumes offered to you are to a certain degree *one work*, in *kind tho’ not in degree*, as an Ode is one work—& . . . our different poems are as stanzas, good relatively rather than absolutely;—Mark you, I say *in kind tho’ not in degree*.” Fraistat discusses this letter in *The Poem and the Book*, p. 51.

¹⁰McGann actually discusses “The Destiny of Nations” in his study of “The Ancient Mariner,” although he takes into account neither the poem’s fragmentation nor its position in *Sibylline Leaves*. He notes that in the poem “God’s self-revelation through the ‘apt agency’ of finite, historical beings is a processive event,” and explains that Coleridge is potentially another link in the chain: “The ‘Beings of higher class than Man’—God and his angels—‘choose their human ministers’ (lines 127, 130) to carry out a providential economy; and each historical period raises up its ministers of this continuous revelation. When Coleridge writes (The Destiny of Nations,’ he reveals himself to be an important functionary in the scheme he himself is articulating” (p. 148). I have argued that the poem qualifies any comparison between, on the one hand, Coleridge and Joan of Arc as he presents her, and, on the other, those spokesmen of God whose words were in fact “witnessed by answering deeds.”

¹¹Wittreich, “‘The Work of Man’s Redemption’: Prophecy and Apocalypse in Romantic Poetry,” *The Age of William Wordsworth*, ed. K.R. Johnston and G.W. Ruoff (1987), p. 49.