



Autumn 2016 Graduate Seminar:
C LIT 548 A \ SLN 11974
with ENGL 529 A \ SLN 14462
and ENGL 498 B \ SLN 23648

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Gift, Sacrifice and the Rites of Literary Exchange: Coleridge and Wordsworth

The literary relationship between Coleridge and Wordsworth constitutes a unique episode in literary history and has been the object of great fascination among critics and biographers, particularly in recent years. As Thomas McFarland accurately states, Coleridge and Wordsworth “not only pervasively influenced one another; they did so in a way that challenges ordinary methods of assessment.” Indeed, it is hard to bring to mind two other writers whose literary careers changed so dramatically under each other’s influence and who appropriated each other’s identity to such an extent that one critic thinks it plausible to regard their poetry as a single work, constituted by two interdependent voices (Paul Magnuson). The myth that Wordsworth was the great poet of nature, as demonstrated by “Tintern Abbey,” and Coleridge was the great poet of the supernatural, as evinced by “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” obfuscates the fact that prior to meeting Coleridge, Wordsworth’s primary interest was in Gothic supernaturalism and victims of social injustice with no model of the mind’s relationship with nature in sight, whereas Coleridge wrote successful nature poetry. During their collaboration on the *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge began to explore the nightmarish effects of supernaturalism on the psyche, though, ironically enough, just at the time when Wordsworth, under Coleridge’s influence, lost interest in the subject. Such moments of merging and separation are particularly instructive, showing the extent to which Coleridge’s and Wordsworth’s literary careers were shaped by what each took to be the identity of the other, often misconceived through the distorting lens of self-projections.

In this course we shall study the relationship between Coleridge and Wordsworth from the perspective of gift and sacrifice, a richly suggestive model that will shed new light on this remarkably intimate and conflicted friendship and will offer the opportunity of investigating a new theory of literary influence based on the dialectic of contractual exchange.

We will begin with a close examination of Marcel Mauss’s seminal study of the gift and the response to it by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marshall Sahlins, Pierre Bourdieu, Lewis Hyde, Georg Simmel and Jacques Derrida, followed by an analysis of theories of sacrifice, as proposed by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, Robertson Smith, Sigmund Freud, René Girard and Georges Bataille. Among other topics we will focus on: the principle of over-reciprocation in the gift, the incommensurability between originary and return gifts; the erasure of the distinction between donors and receivers in gift exchange, and conversely, between sacrificer, victim, priest and deity in sacrifice; the role of intermediaries in sacrifice and the gift, i.e. the sacrificial victim and the person through whom the gift passes; the recuperative nature of gift and sacrifice; and the function of misrecognition in both economies. In the second half of the course, we will study the successive phases of Coleridge’s literary exchange with Wordsworth, from an early period when they regarded their productions as “one work” in the spirit of gift exchange, to progressive alienation and rivalry.

Requirements: two brief (2-3 pp.) response papers on theories of gift and sacrifice; a final paper on Coleridge and Wordsworth (10 -15 pp.). Texts: *The Logic of the Gift*, ed. Alan D. Schrift; Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*; René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*; Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings*; *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose* (Norton); *Wordsworth’s Poetry and Prose* (Norton).

Additional articles and excerpts from books will be provided in photocopy.

