

Me and Coleridge Take a Spin in the Phlegethon

by Con Chapman

I've been a big fan of Samuel Taylor Coleridge since high school, and not just because of the Ancient Mariner who, like a bad hockey goalie, "stoppeth one of three."



Coleridge, in his Dan Fogelberg period.

No, like so many high school drugheads I warmed up to Coleridge when I heard he was an dope fiend. I mean, if you want to get young men interested in poetry, it helps if you lure them to the difficult beauties of the art through a shared interest in controlled substances.

Like most high school English teachers, mine started us out at the top, with *Kubla Khan*, whose mesmerizing meter—and try saying *that* five times fast—burns itself into the brain upon a first reading: *In Xanadu did Kubla Khan, A stately pleasure dome decree.* Tends to stay with you longer than other, inferior poetry I encountered during

the same era; nobody remembers the second line of *In a Gadda-da-Vida*, for example.

But with Coleridge, the longer I read him the further I am drawn back to the source of his work, to the poems that he wrote in his youth, before his art was fully-formed. I'm talking about works such as *The Nose*, with its stirring call that resounds down the centuries: *A Nose! a mighty Nose I sing!*

Granted, not the kind of line you can get a Ph. D. dissertation out of, but still—to a man who's just started the long, hard slog to his seventh decade—words that recall the years of his youth, with all its bright promise.



I pay tribute to Coleridge through my care and maintenance of a vintage Phlegethon, whose nose-shaped grille made it a favorite of English professors in the 50s. The Phlegethon shows up in *The Nose*, in the lines that boys recite from memory, if they're boys like I was:

*So like the Nose I sing—my verse shall glow—
Like Phlegethon my verse in waves of fire shall flow!*

God, what a poet! I thought as I read those lines, my nose stuffed up and burning with my usual fall cold. I had blithely assumed that the Phlegethon was named for phlegm, one of the four distinct bodily fluids of the ancient Greek medical concept of humorism,

until STC his own bad self set me straight on one of our Saturday drives.

“You know who else uses phelgm in literature?” I ask him as he squeezes himself into the front seat. “Dashiell Hammett, in *The Thin Man*. At one point Nick Charles asks for a drink of scotch ‘to cut the phlegm’ and . . .”



Myrna Loy, William Powell in The Thin Man

“What are you talking about?” he snaps. “‘Phlegethon’ isn’t derived from phlegm, it’s one of the five rivers of the underworld in Greek mythology.”

Oops. I’ve betrayed my ignorance of Greek mythology, and revealed his with one inept stroke.

“Oh—so it’s not snot?”

“You aren’t going to recite a stupid poem of your childhood, are you?”

“Of course,” I say and then begin:

*Everybody’s doin’ it, doin’ it, doin’ it—
Pickin’ their nose and chewin’ it, chewin’ it—
They think it’s candy but it’s snot.*

“Hmph,” he hmphs, not impressed with the classic of illicit boys’ poetry as much as I am with his.



In my humble opinion Coleridge was bipolar, and who could blame him? When he was my age he'd been dead six months. At the end, his best work was behind him, he was out of money, estranged from his former good friend Bill Wordsworth, still obsessed with Sara Hutchinson. He'd tried numerous times to kick his addiction to laudanum—opium mixed with alcohol, usually wine in his case. The habit had taken its toll on his body and . . .

“Enough with the interior monologue,” he snaps. “Pull into that gas station up there.”

I do so, even though I've got a full tank. I know what the problem is—he's constipated again, and it's killing him; he's a guy who used to receive visitors on his “close-stool,” so eager was he to seize the moment when he felt he might possibly be able to do what comes so naturally to most everybody else. I, for example, mastered the function shortly after I was born, and have never lost the hang of it.

I drive up alongside the men's room. It's locked, and Coleridge flies into one of his trademark laments of despondency:

*O, I could write a sad oration,
One that would fill the reader with gloom!
Whenever I stop at a gas station
They've locked me out of the men's room.*

“Chill out,” I say. “I'll go buy something to eat at the Grab 'n Go Quiki-Mart and get the key. You want anything?”

“Do they have mutton jerky?”

“You—constantly costive—are actually going to eat dried, salted, spicy meat strips?”

“What would you suggest?” he asks, getting huffy. I don't think he ever forgave Sara Hutchinson for giving up “animal foods.” My guess is he was the first male writer to suffer at the hands of a vegetarian girlfriend—but he certainly won't be the last.

“Caffeine is a diuretic,” I say. “Have a cup of coffee.”

“I'll have a Coke.”

“May I suggest a Diet Coke?” I say, eyeing his waistline critically.

He winces, perhaps the same way he did when *prima donna* Anna-Cecilia Bertozzi made the “melancholy observation” that he was growing fat—as she said goodbye to him when he left Rome!

“If you knew anything about me, you'd know *not* to mention that!” he moans. The front seat is suddenly crowded because he's beside himself.

I go inside, make my obligatory purchases, then return with the men's room key. He grabs it and is gone—a long time. By the time he's returned, I've finished a Twizzler's red licorice.

“Can we go to a wine bar?” he asks innocently, but I know his game.



“Not if you're going to try and slip dope into your drink,” I say.

"C'mon—I happen to know you were a user in your youth." The guy's like an open hydrant—he just can't turn off the flow of his poetry.



Moby Grape: Enthusiasm of my benighted youth.

"Yeah, but I quit. Like St. Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, when I was a child I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I smoked pot and listened to The Steve Miller Band and Moby Grape like a child. But when I became a man . . ."

"Enough—I promise."

We drive to Filippo's, a *petite boit de nuit* as the French would say if their accents were as bad as mine. I order a Malbec and Coleridge, knowing he won't get his usual extra kicker, orders a Harveys Bristol Cream.

"Over the teeth and through the gums—look out stomach, here it comes!" I say, but Coleridge only screws up his face at me. This is a man, by the way, about whom it was said (by none other than Charles Lamb) that whenever he said he was going to turn sober, "he pours down goblet after goblet, the 2d to see where the 1st is gone, the 3d to see no harm happens to the second, a fourth to say there's another coming, and a 5th to say he's not sure he's the last."



Charles Lamb

"You don't need to be such a sourpuss," I tell him. "You're in every poetry anthology that matters."

"I am?"

"Sure. *Nobody* gets out of high school these days without reading both *Kubla Khan* and the *Ancient Mariner*."

"Really?" he says, sounding both pleased and surprised.

"Yep. So there was no need to destroy yourself with drink and drugs."



"Perhaps, but it made the pain of daily life bearable."

“Bearable? A lifetime of constipation?”

“Well, tolerable.”

“I’ll bet you dollars to donuts if you’d just cut back *a little* you would have been much happier.”

“But wouldn’t have come up with lines like

*Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

We are both silent for a moment, savoring the moment and the madness he’s recalled. “Okay, I’ll grant you that—but how about the missing lines?”

That caught him like a counterpunch. *Kubla* was planned to be several hundred lines instead of just fifty, but when he was interrupted by an importunate caller, he forgot them.

“That wasn’t the fault of the opium. It was that foolish person from Poorlock who interrupted my writing.”

“Yes, but if you hadn’t been hung over from a night of opium, you would have remembered them.”

“If it hadn’t been for the opium, the images would not have been so vivid, the rhythm of the lines so enchanting, the . . .”

“As my mom would say, don’t break your arm patting yourself on the back.”

He’s quiet again, so I decide to impart one last pearl of druggie wisdom. “If you learn nothing else from the experience, I hope you learn this.”

“What?”

“If you’ve been taking drugs and somebody knocks on the door—DON’T ANSWER IT!”

