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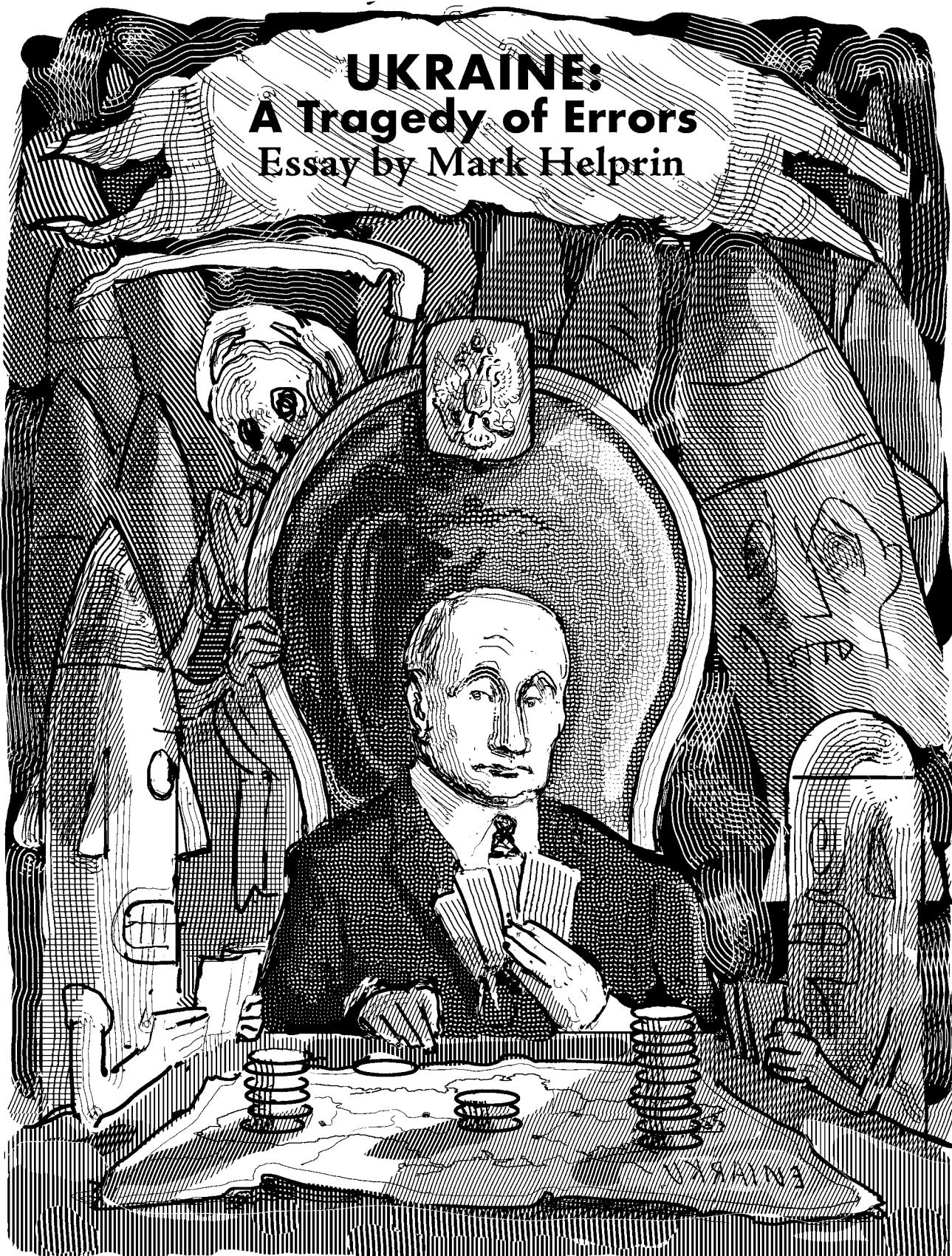
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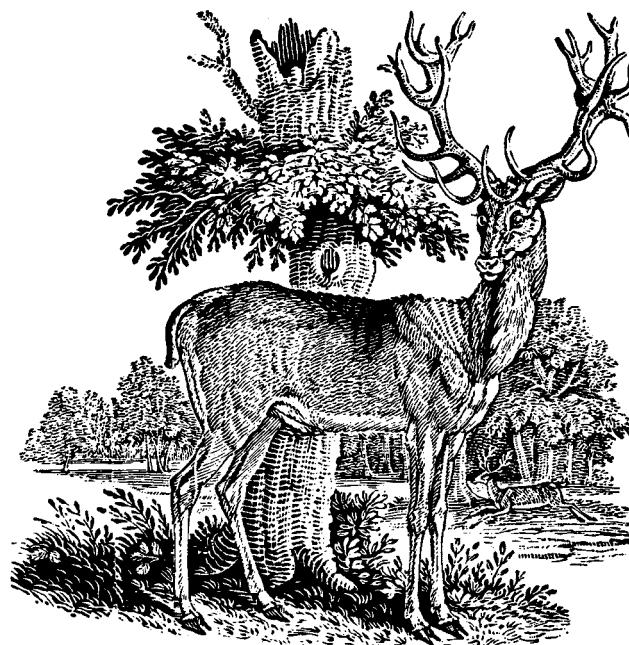
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Essay by Andrew Klavan

THE GATE TO THE GARDEN

How Coleridge and Wordsworth reinvented the conscience of a radical age.



Engraving by Thomas Bewick, 1790

IN 1797, ON A DAY IN JUNE—ONE OF THE most famous days in literary history, though no one seems to know whether it was the 4th or 5th—Samuel Taylor Coleridge walked the 40 miles from Somerset to visit William Wordsworth at his house in Dorset. It had been a cold and lingering winter, but the chilly May had warmed up finally. Dorset’s rolling green hills were purple with wildflowers as they ran southward to the sea. It was spring at last.

It was spring in a nation at war. Napoleon was on the march. Italy had fallen. Austria had surrendered. Great Britain was becoming isolated. Allies were in short supply. In the English countryside, there was bleak poverty all around—poverty and its attendant evils. Every other newborn died. Adults couldn’t expect to live past 40. It was no wonder the government was nervous about insurrections, no wonder it was cracking down on any talk of revolt.

All the same, revolution and radicalism were everywhere. The Romantic era, from roughly 1770 to 1850, was uncannily like the present age, from around 1960, say, to this moment. As the social revolution of the 1960s sought to usher in a utopia of universal peace and love, so the French Revolution of the 1770s rapidly became a search for utopian liberty, equality, and brotherhood. These revolutions failed, as all utopian revolutions

must. The tyranny inherent in their luminous philosophies worked out its conclusion in far-flung wars in foreign lands: the proxy battles of the Cold War for us, the Napoleonic wars for the Romantics. And when these wars were over, our countries—America, England—became the premier nations of their eras, the leaders of the free world.

With the promise of utopia gone a conservative political reaction set in, but that reaction could not stop the revolution of minds. New science was undermining old beliefs. Radicals and traditionalists wrestled for control of the popular imagination. In Romantic England, a new Christian movement called the Evangelicals began to campaign for a return to virtue and piety. At the same time, progressives began to question every assumption on which the civilization was based. Feminists sought to dismantle gender roles, sexual mores, and the institution of marriage. Reformers railed against the treatment of people of color. Historians wondered whether this mighty nation would fall like every other nation before it, and whether it ought to fall for the betterment of the greater world.

It was eerily there and then as it is here and now.

And with it all, beneath it all—to my mind, at the source of it all, then as now—were the growing doubts, first about Christianity, and

then about the very existence of God. Then as now atheism, long reviled and suppressed, became a legitimate minority view. In fact, for many intellectuals—then as now—the central principle of the age was unbelief, the sickness-unto-death of God.

Pacing the Pathway

THE THRONE FEARED REVOLUTION and cracked down. Both Coleridge and Wordsworth were in the government’s sights because of their radicalism. At one point in the coming year, the Home Office (England’s department of crime reduction) would send a special agent to investigate them. Coleridge joked that the agent probably reported their suspicious conversations about “Spy Nozy”—Spinoza.

The truth, though, was that both men were in retreat from political activism. Both were sunk in sorrow and disappointment at how the high-blown dreams of the French Revolution had given way to such a low, blood-drenched reality. Their hearts were still with the poor, still set on liberty and reform. But each on his own was beginning to turn toward poetry—a new kind of poetry in, as Wordsworth wrote, “the language of men”—as a way of giving voice to the “obscure and lowly” and to the age’s yearning for liberation.



Wordsworth, at 27, was coming to the end of a radical youth and beginning his long journey toward political conservatism. He had traveled to France twice during the Revolution. He had fathered a child during a passionate affair with a Frenchwoman. He had run errands in Paris for the Girondist radicals. But as relations between the French and English soured, he had to hie for home, leaving his lover and their child behind for good. Scrounging, penniless, around London, he had attended radical meetings and penned an angry letter against a conservative bishop—a rant that likely would have gotten him arrested had it ever seen the light of day.

Eventually, broke and disillusioned, Wordsworth had seized on a chance to live with his sister, Dorothy, in the country house of a friend. A legacy had come in, and they were earning some cash by taking care of two children. For a while, at least, their money problems were over.

It was the first time brother and sister lived together since their father died in 1783. The Wordsworth children had been farmed out to various families after that. It had been a long and traumatic separation. But Wordsworth and Dorothy would never be parted again. Their closeness was to become literary legend. Her ideas, her observations, even her occasional fine turns of phrase became part and parcel of his poetry. A local farmer would describe how Wordsworth would pace down a pathway muttering new verses to himself—“Bum bum bum”—while “Miss Dorothy kept close behind him and she picked up the bits as he let ‘em fall, and tak ‘em down, and put ‘em on paper for him.” Author Adam Nicolson, who wonderfully describes these days in his meditative *The Making of Poetry: Coleridge, the Wordsworths, and Their Year of Marvels* (2019), says Dorothy was Wordsworth’s “mind-sister”—a perfect term.

As for Wordsworth and Coleridge, they had met a few times before over the last year and a half. Coleridge already admired Wordsworth and suspected his genius. “I feel myself a *little man by his side*,” he would say. Wordsworth also suspected Wordsworth’s genius. But he hadn’t quite wrestled it into the light. He was trying. Pacing the pathway. Bum bum bum.

What was to replace radicalism in the minds of these men? What was to give them a new basis for political action and poetical creation?

Merlin and Muse

THAT JUNE DAY, WORKING IN THE GARDEN outside their kitchen, Wordsworth and Dorothy saw Coleridge approach. “At first I thought him very plain, that is, for about three minutes,” Dorothy later remem-

bered. “He is pale, thin, has a wide mouth, thick lips, and not very good teeth, longish, loose-growing, half-curling, rough black hair.... His eye is large and full, and not very dark, but grey...it speaks every emotion of his animated mind.” The main road—the high road—wound around to the front of the house. But as brother and sister watched, Coleridge left the road and—as Wordsworth still recalled more than 50 years later—“Leapt over a gate and bounded down the pathless field” to meet them.

Already, at 24, Coleridge was a man who knew everything. He may have been the last man who ever did, the last man who ever could, as this was the last era in which it could be done. Soon, the flourishing sciences and discoveries of exploration would create uncountable new realms of knowledge that would require specialists to understand them. But for the moment, Coleridge could plausibly daydream about preparing to write an epic poem by first taking ten years to learn “universal science. I would be a tolerable Mathematician. I would thoroughly understand Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Optics and Astronomy, Botany, Metallurgy, Fossilism, Chemistry, Geology, Anatomy, Medicine—then the mind of man—then the minds of men—in all Travels, Voyages and Histories.”

In the event, this was only one of the million fantastical ideas that were always going off like fireworks in his brain. Each in turn fluttered down into darkness as his capricious temperament carried his mind off elsewhere and his ever-growing addiction to laudanum rendered him increasingly incapable of focused work.

Coleridge was fractious from his early days. At Cambridge, writes Richard Holmes in his superb two-volume biography, *Coleridge* (1989-99), he “began to live a kind of double life...his wild expenditure on books, drinking, violin lessons, theatre and whoring...alternating with fits of suicidal gloom and remorse.” There were debts. There was an absurd effort to escape his debts by joining a cavalry regiment, the King’s Light Dragoons. His failed attempts to learn to ride a warhorse left him with saddle sores that “grimly constellated my Posteriori.” His brothers eventually got him discharged for reasons of “insanity.” There followed an endearingly kooky scheme to start a utopian commune in America, the “Pantisocracy.” It was another brain flash that faded to nothing. Unfortunately, part of the scheme involved his getting married to one of the Pantisocracy’s women. It was a terrible mistake, a cruelly bad marriage for both of them.

Still, in all his troubles, he never stopped learning. He read everything. And he never

stopped talking, either. “He talks as a bird sings,” said Wordsworth. “As if he could not help it: it is his nature.” “He talked on forever, and you wished him to talk on forever,” wrote the essayist William Hazlitt. “His voice rolled on the ear like a pealing organ, and its sound alone was the music of thought.” In that time of genius, Coleridge seemed to be everywhere and to speak to everyone. And everyone he spoke to was changed by what he said.

The essayist Charles Lamb, his childhood friend, suspected Coleridge’s talk had driven him, Lamb, insane. During the time Coleridge was plotting out his American utopia, the two friends would meet at an inn called the Salutation and Cat. They would sit by the fire to discuss poetry and politics and their various disappointments in romance. “He would talk from morn to dewy eve, nor cease till far midnight,” Lamb later remembered. “Yet who ever would interrupt him—who would obstruct that continuous flow of converse.” This was not entirely a compliment. “From morn to dewy eve” is a phrase from *Paradise Lost*. It describes the fall of Satan, his long tumble down from heaven into hell, “from morn to noon...from noon to dewy eve, a summer’s day.” Coleridge, Lamb was saying, could talk like the very devil.

Soon after these meetings, Lamb had a breakdown and was carted off, delusional, to the madhouse. Lamb’s brother blamed Coleridge for it. Lamb himself remembered Coleridge’s chatter as “a blessing partly and partly a curse.” When he was recovering from his crackup, he wrote to Coleridge, “I charge you don’t think of coming to see me. Write. I will not see you if you come.”

That took place a few years before Coleridge leapt the garden gate at Wordsworth’s house. A few years after that, Coleridge visited with the radical thinker William Godwin. Godwin’s home was a gathering place for intellectuals and artists. One night, Coleridge recited his great poem there, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” The story goes that Godwin’s nine-year-old daughter, Mary, and her stepsister, Claire, hid behind the sofa so they could listen. Later, when Mary grew up to write *Frankenstein*, she sprinkled references to the “Mariner”—by “the most imaginative of modern poets”—throughout the book. In one scene, when Frankenstein is traveling through the countryside, fearful of meeting his homicidal creation, he uses a quote from the “Mariner” to describe his terror. He says he is

Like one who, on a lonely road,
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And, having once turned round, walks on,
And turns no more his head;

Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

These words so terrified Mary's lover, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, that when he first heard them, he fainted dead away.

Fascination and madness, inspiration and fear: the words of Samuel Coleridge had a power to them. They worked on the mind.

For Wordsworth, Coleridge would become a Merlin and a muse. In that first year after he leapt the gate at Dorset, his ideas, his outlook, his endless talk were the conjuring spell that brought Wordsworth's talent to life and fruition. The book they would write together—*Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*—would revolutionize the art of English poetry. In doing so, it would give the men and women of this revolutionary era new words by which to know themselves.

A Single Imagination

SO WHAT WAS COLERIDGE SAYING? What was he forever talking about that worked such agitation and such magic on those who heard him?

It's not an easy question to answer. Coleridge claimed he had developed a complete system of philosophy. He always planned to write it down, but of course—of course—he never did. It appears in fragments here and there, in sermons, articles, and dissertations, and in his rambling sort-of-autobiography, *Biographia Literaria*. Sometimes his thoughts are orderly and clear. Often, they are fragmentary and disjointed, the cries of a storm-tossed mind blown to half whispers by interior winds. Always, they are written in the crushingly abstruse style of the German philosophers he loved.

Like those philosophers, he was wrestling with what Hazlitt called the Spirit of the Age. "The one thing that unifies men in a given age is not their individual philosophies but the dominant problem that these philosophies are designed to solve," wrote the critic Jacques Barzun in *Romanticism and the Modern Ego* (1943). "In the romantic period...this problem was to create a new world on the ruins of the old. The French Revolution and Napoleon had made a clean sweep. Even before the Revolution, which may be taken as the outward sign of an inward decay, it was no longer possible to think, act, write, or paint as if the old forms still had life."

The old forms were the forms of Christian faith. Unable to recapture religion in its medieval ubiquity and completeness, certain British Romantic poets began to develop what scholar M.H. Abrams called, in his book of the same

name, *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), in which "traditional concepts, schemes, and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creature and creation" were reframed as "the human mind or consciousness and its transactions with nature."

One of the most insightful readers of Coleridge's philosophy, English philosopher Owen Barfield, saw Coleridge and other poets as attempting to restore the holiness of matter. In a wonderful little book called *Poetic Diction* (1928), Barfield argues that, in its origins, language originally expressed the unity of physical and spiritual experience. The Greek word *pneuma*, for instance, which now means both "breath" and "spirit," once, according to Barfield, united these meanings into a single concept: "spirit-breath." Over time, the meanings separated and were related only metaphorically. Without the unity of language, we lost the unity of meaning. It became more difficult for us to experience physical reality as being infused with spiritual meaning.

The purpose of poetry, Barfield says, is to reunite the language of the physical with the language of the spiritual, and so recreate the original human experience of the holiness of

Coleridge and other poets were attempting to restore the holiness of matter.

things. Like the mass, poetry transubstantiates matter into matter-and-spirit.

But how does the poet know when his spiritual perceptions are legitimate, a collaboration with reality rather than a fanciful thing of his own? How do any of us know whether our beauty is really beauty and our truth really truth? Coleridge suspected the answer lay in Jesus. "Might not Christ be the World as revealed to human knowledge?" he asked. "A kind of common sensorium, the total Idea that modifies all our thoughts?"

The word *sensorium* means the apparatus of human sensation, the way in which we experience the world. Coleridge's idea is that Christ is the model and perfection of that experience, a true melding of flesh and spirit, life and Logos, man and God. The more we experience the world through Christ, the more we become like Christ and know the world truly. Thus the human imagination becomes, in Coleridge's words, "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am."

On the day Coleridge arrived in Dorset, Wordsworth had no such certainty. As a

young man, he had had moments of dizzying and ecstatic unity with nature, but he had not given that experience a Christian shape. "He loves and venerates Christ and Christianity—I wish he did more," Coleridge said of him. But Coleridge suspected Wordsworth was a "semi-atheist." And though the two of them discussed everything else under the sun, they were "habitually silent" on the subject of religion.

All the same, when Coleridge leapt the gate and came galumphing through the corn rows toward the Wordsworths in their garden, he was bringing his vision to a man struggling to find a vision of his own. In the year that followed, Wordsworth and Coleridge—and Dorothy, whom Coleridge would come to call "our sister"—would walk and talk and write almost as if they were becoming a single imagination.

The Wordsworths ended up moving to Somerset to be nearer the Coleridges. They would climb the rough and beautiful Quantock Hills together, along what today is called The Coleridge Way. Given what we know of Coleridge, it's fair to assume the Wordsworths did a lot of listening, and a lot of pretending to listen as one does with a gabbling child. Nonetheless, like everyone who ever met Coleridge, Wordsworth could not help but be imbued with the genius of the magnificent mind within this broken man. When, years later, he would describe the poetic imagination as "an agent of the one great mind...creator and receiver both, working but in alliance with the works which it beholds," it's clear that the spirit of Coleridge had spoken into Wordsworth's own spirit. Coleridge had shaped his understanding of human consciousness.

Spiritual Journey

THE RESULT OF THEIR WORK TOGETHER was the anthology *Lyrical Ballads*. By this, I mean the first edition, published in 1798. Later editions included some improvements and many new great and famous poems by Wordsworth, as well as his two important essays on poetry. But as unified works, their shape was distorted by Wordsworth's titanic ego, his attempt to overwhelm and even evict Coleridge's contribution from the original. The first edition had an organic shape that derived from their collaboration, and that shape has a special genius later editions don't have.

The idea of the book was this: If the purpose of poetry is to reunite flesh and spirit, nature and meaning, through the human imagination, the two poets would approach



that purpose from its two opposing poles. Coleridge would bring the imagination of man into nature, and Wordsworth would recreate nature in the image of man's imagination. As Coleridge described it, he would write about "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." Wordsworth, on the other hand, as Coleridge went on, would "give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and...excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us."

The finished anthology was messier than that, but you can see the plan in it. The two greatest poems in the volume are the first one, Coleridge's supernatural nightmare, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and the last one, Wordsworth's contemplation of the natural scene a few miles above Tintern Abbey. You can almost read the anthology as a spiritual journey from that first poem to the last.

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" famously begins with the old sailor of the title stopping a man on his way to a wedding. The sailor then tells the wedding guest a wild tale about a ship on which he sailed.

Lost in dangerously icy Antarctic waters, the mariner, for no reason we ever learn, shot a friendly albatross with his crossbow. Soon after, the wind died. The ship was becalmed in strange seas. The crew was surrounded by "Water, water, every where, Ne any drop to drink." Furious with thirst, the crew forced the mariner to wear the albatross around his neck "instead of the Cross." A mysterious ship pulled close. On board, a living skeleton and a horrifying woman—Death and "the nightmare LIFE-IN-DEATH"—played dice for the crew. When the witchy woman won, all 200 men fell dead—all except the mariner. He was doomed to go on living alone with the dead crew staring curses at him and the ship surrounded by "slimy things" that "crawl with legs upon the slimy sea."

But after seven days of this he experienced a powerful transformation. The slimy snakes on the water somehow began to seem beautiful to him and, "A spring of love gush'd from

my heart, / And I bless'd them unaware!" Suddenly, the albatross fell from around his neck. He found himself able to pray. The wind rose. The dead men came to life and helped pilot the ship safely home with the mariner the lone survivor.

His tale finished, the mariner delivers the moral to the wedding guest: "He prayeth best who loveth best, / All things both great and small: / For the dear God, who loveth us, / He made and loveth all." Aside from the beauty of its language and the nightmare brilliance of its imagery, the genius of the poem lies in the way it locates the Christian mythos in the imagination of man. The senseless crossbow killing of an albatross like a "Christian soul"; the interior change of mind that reveals nature through love; the love that frees the mariner to pray so that the body of the bird that hangs around his neck like a cross falls off; the redemption of the dead—it is as if Coleridge is showing us that even if Christ had never lived, the Christian truth would still shape our perceptions because it is the Logos built into nature.

After "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," in poem after poem (most of them by Wordsworth) *Lyrical Ballads* shows us the beauty of "slimy things"—the things we want to turn away from—the poor, the broken, the lowly, the damaged, and the obscure. The poems give us nature irradiated by the interior sensations of the least among us: an abandoned mother who may have killed her child, a female vagrant, a forsaken Indian woman, an idiot boy. Their life, joys, and suffering humanize the hills and forests around. In loving the least of them, we learn to love the nature of which they are a part and we bless creation unawares without even realizing our hearts have been transformed.

Which brings us to the final poem in the book, Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." The poet is walking with his "mind-sister" Dorothy when he comes in view of the abbey, abandoned since the enforced dissolution of the Catholic monasteries during the Reformation. It has fallen into ruins. Wordsworth may be speaking for an entire culture—embodying an entire culture—when he stands by those ruins of Christian unity at the end of Europe's childhood and thinks back to his own childhood and his Edenic connection with the natural world. Like Europe's Christian certainties, Wordsworth's childhood is gone. He

did not need to find philosophy in nature then. He was at one with the simple fact and beauty of it, like a man at the beginning of time who sees breath and spirit as a single thing. But those days of "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" and "thoughtless youth" are gone. Now, instead, and as a consolation for their loss, when the disillusioned radical looks at nature, and at the entire "mighty world / Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create, / And what perceive," he hears "the still sad music of humanity" and has "a sense sublime"

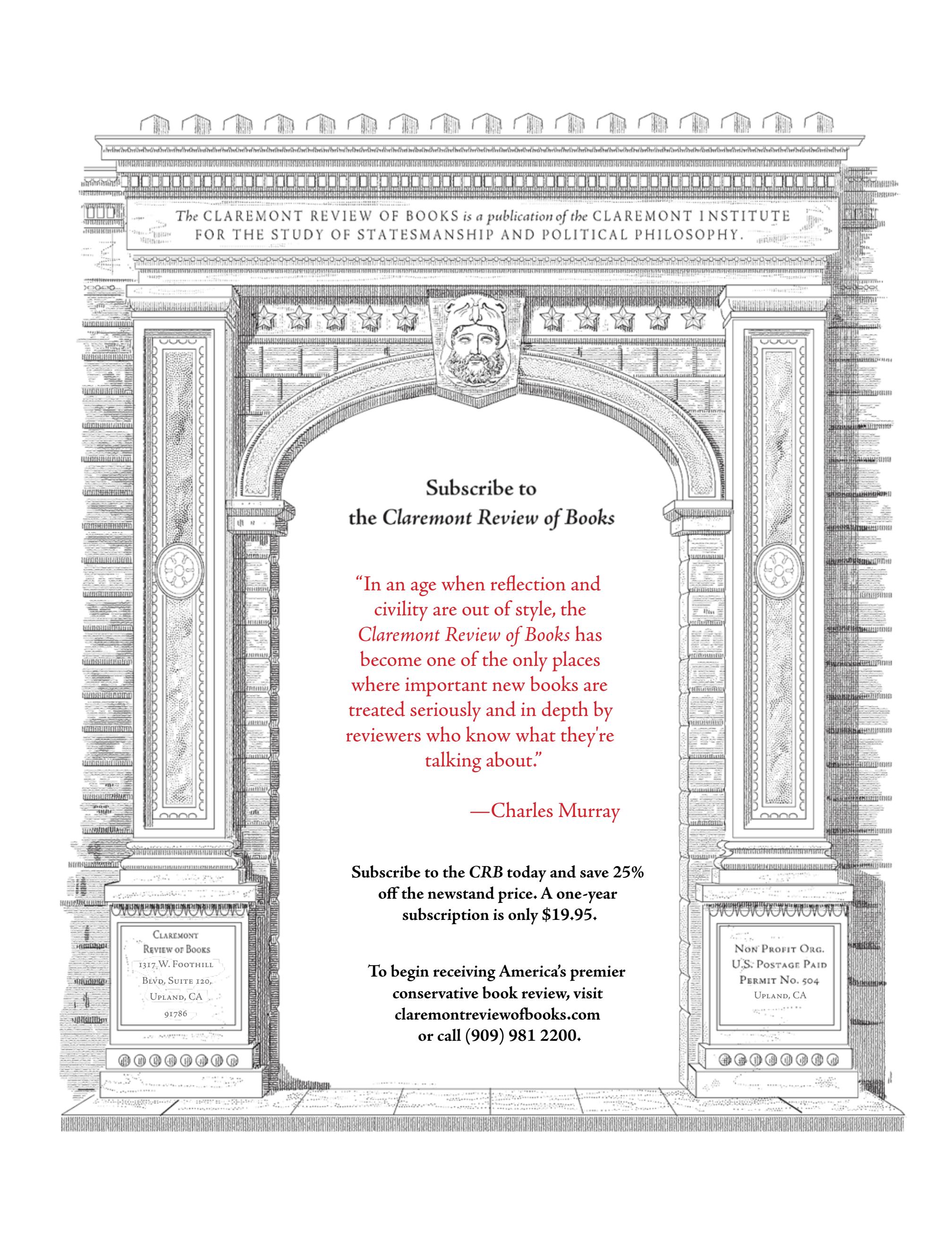
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

In some sense, this Wordsworth is Coleridge's greatest contribution to the anthology. Like the wedding guest listening to the mariner, Wordsworth has listened to Coleridge and become "a sadder and a wiser man." He is the man who will go on to defend the idea of liberty and tradition against the radicals of the day, to embrace Christian faith and even to become the poet laureate of the Victorian England that would create the English Century.

John Stuart Mill, raised a strict utilitarian, would turn to Wordsworth's work when that faddish philosophy failed him and he was plunged into depression. "What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought colored by feeling, under the excitement of beauty.... In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy."

After the Age of Reason led to a Reign of Terror, Coleridge and Wordsworth answered the materialist radicalism of the moment by reinventing and reinvigorating the concept of the human soul.

Andrew Klavan is a bestselling novelist, contributing editor of City Journal, and the host of "The Andrew Klavan Show" on DailyWire.com. This essay is excerpted from his new book, The Truth and Beauty: How the Lives and Works of England's Greatest Poets Point the Way to a Deeper Understanding of the Words of Jesus (Zondervan Books).



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