



# The 'Reserve of Superstition': Graves, Coleridge, and the Poetry of Mystery

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**Abstract:** This essay proposes a relationship between Samuel Taylor Coleridge's thinking on superstition and the views that Graves presents in 'The Uses of Superstition'. In particular, it describes the ways in which, for both poets, superstition embodies intuitive orders of perception that might amplify, rather than inhibit, processes of reasoning, knowing, and apprehending; and how the use of this faculty corresponds to the use of mystery in the practice of poetry.

**Key words:** Coleridge, S. T., superstition, poetry, mystery, consciousness, knowledge

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Robert Graves's essay 'The Uses of Superstition' began as a talk he gave at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1963, where, he told his audience, he would welcome any evidence that superstition 'has not been successfully banished even from the Laboratories'.<sup>1</sup> The essay's purpose, as its title suggests, is at odds with the longstanding historical tendency, first in a religious context, and latterly in a scientific one, to dismiss 'superstition' outright, as untrue, ignorant, and irrational: not only worthless, but damaging. Johnson's definition for the *Dictionary* of 1755 summarises the learned attitude of his time:

1. Unnecessary fear or scruples in religion; observance of unnecessary and uncommanded rites or practices; religion without morality.
2. False religion; reverence of beings not proper objects of reverence; false worship.
3. Over-nicety; exactness too scrupulous.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of ‘uncommanded rites and practices’ is perhaps the most suggestive of these terms to a modern ear, in that it leaves the door ajar to something self-determined and spontaneous; something that might slip the net of prevailing orthodoxies to assume its own heretical life. It also comes closest to Graves’s own definition of ‘superstition’ as ‘those ancient rites, taboos, or impulses that have survived a change of religious doctrine’ (*Crane Bag*, p. 203).

On the face of it, that definition ties Graves’s thinking on superstition to the ‘survival’ theory regarding the persistence (for example) of pre-Christian beliefs and practices in Christian Europe. This idea – that observable, contemporary customs, proverbs, rites, and practices are relics of ancient pagan religion – emerged in its modern form in the seventeenth century: the antiquarian John Aubrey, for example, justified recording the ‘vulgar proverbs’ of rural people because they embody ‘the ancient natural philosophy of the vulgar’.<sup>3</sup> This in itself, as Aubrey well knew, was an ancient notion: he quoted Pliny the Elder as an authority on the point.<sup>4</sup> By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, the idea of pagan survivals was widely established among folklorists, anthropologists, and archaeologists.<sup>5</sup> On this view – promulgated for many years, in particular, by scholars of the Folklore Society (founded in 1878) – folk customs were read as ‘cultural fossils’ of authentic pagan practices (Hutton, p. 113). The ramifications were far-reaching: dovetailing with revolutionary developments in the natural sciences, arts, and letters alike, these entailed a root-and-branch revision of the religious history of Europe, rapidly applied by comparative anthropology to humankind as a whole. James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* may have been reticent in spelling out its radical implications – ‘carefully and methodically sailing all round his dangerous subject’, as Graves puts it – but its message got through, to enormously influential effect: in Graves’s summary, ‘What he was saying-not-saying was that Christian legend, dogma and ritual are the refinement of a great body of primitive and even barbarous beliefs, and that almost the only original element in Christianity is the personality of Jesus’.<sup>6</sup>

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Graves came to intellectual maturity immersed in this atmosphere, and of course his own work – not least *The White Goddess* – participates in its radical dynamic. ‘The Uses of Superstition’ follows the pattern of the early twentieth-century folklorist in relating the now much-waned fear of seeing the moon through glass, for example, to stories of the dying hero ‘taken by the Moon-goddess to her glass castle at the back of the North Wind’ (*Crane Bag*, p. 206). Likewise, to bring mayflower into the house is to curse the marriage bed, he says, ‘because the old matriarchal goddess Maia, or Cardea, to whom the may-tree was sacred, hated patriarchal marriage and demanded propitiation at Roman weddings: she would otherwise produce miscarriages or deaths in childbirth’ (p. 206). By the time Graves publishes ‘The Uses of Superstition’ in 1969, the idea that contemporary superstitions were direct survivals of ancient pagan belief and practice was increasingly questioned by younger scholars: the easy correlation Graves assumes in the examples given above would already have looked a little quaint (Hutton, pp. 112-13). The essay shows, however, that Graves was alive to something more in superstition than the theory of pagan survivals – whatever its virtues and limitations – could comprise: something with its own far-reaching implications, both for psychology and for poetry, and in particular the role that poetry might now play in a post-religious culture that has yet to develop a post-religious vocabulary. It is to this – and its foreshadowing in Coleridge – that I now turn.

Graves is alert to what could be called the phenomenology of superstition: the way *new* superstitions emerge within, from, and adapted to *new* historical circumstances. ‘British hospitals are hotbeds of superstition’, he writes, and gives examples of historically recent superstitions he traces to the Crimean War, the Boer War, the First World War, and a Victorian novel (*Crane Bag*, pp. 207, 206, 204). Graves also acknowledges the cultural and temporal contingency of superstition: ‘Peacock feathers are bad luck in an English home; but lucky in India’ (p. 203).<sup>7</sup> He explains that although not a Christian, having turned from his Protestant upbringing in his teens, ‘I should find it both needless and

uncomfortable to abjure many superstitions which are part of my cultural heritage, chief of which is the idolatrous respect paid to a Bible' (p. 205). He describes a long list of superstitions observed, he claims, by his family on the Anglo-Irish side, and indeed a superstition unique to his family: 'it has always been unlucky in my family to see a parson mounted on a white horse' (pp. 205-207). There are family superstitions – just as there are family words. The inference that I'm interested in here is that, for Graves – despite his evident commitment to the idea of pagan survivals – the *fact* of superstition, as a human phenomenon, is more important than its provenance.

This in turn suggests that superstition is somehow implicate in human consciousness. It is not so much a fixed belief, but a pattern, or matrix, at work in the spontaneous, self-ordering activity of the psyche: the manifestation of a faculty, which – like the imagination – may either be cultivated or left to atrophy. Graves makes two interrelated psychological points that treat superstition in this way, and speak in its favour. 'I find myself far more at home with mildly superstitious people', he says, 'than with stark rationalists. They have more humanity' (p. 212). This is not merely a decorative matter; in that question of 'humanity' an entire world-view is at stake, with enormous practical consequences for us and our habitat:

Ancient superstitions in Britain are dying out under industrialism. I regret this trend. The man who stops in a crowded street and bows to the moon is not one who would wilfully destroy an Elizabethan house and replace it with a petrol station, or who would behave unchivalrously to women. Most superstitions do no harm, and are to urban life what grace notes are to a folk-song: they give it character. I would go further, and say that strongly held superstitions are necessary counter-weights to the unfettered intellect. (p. 209)

The point about 'character' is that it comprises an affective reality not reducible merely to rational terms: it communicates in ways that – like physiological gestures, birdsong, or colour – are

recognised, intuited, experienced, before they are reasoned out. This foregrounds Graves's contention that superstition acts as a *necessary* counterweight to the unfettered intellect – and in this further point, Graves echoes the thinking of one of his favourite poets: Coleridge.<sup>8</sup>

In Walter Scott's *Waverley*, the character Edward is surprised (and somewhat disappointed) to observe in Fergus – 'notwithstanding his knowledge and education' – a 'reserve of superstition', that probably lingered, we are told, because he did 'not think deeply or accurately on such subjects'.<sup>9</sup> This prompted Coleridge to respond in the margins of his own copy as follows:

In the most reflecting minds there may, nay must, exist a certain '*reserve* of Superstition[?]', from the consciousness of the vast disproportion of our knowledge to the terra incognita yet to be known—Between these is a region of indistinctness, sights not forms, but to which we give a form/ Some few are aware, that the *form* is their own gift, yet without denying a SOMEWHAT seen/ whenever the last understood *causes* may be, still aliquid *superstat*—and [this] it is, which constitutes the reason of *Superstition*, and makes it reasonable.<sup>10</sup>

This note was written in the late 1820s, but Coleridge had always been interested in superstition. At times he used the term in a conventionally pejorative sense, pillorying both ecclesiastical obscurantism complicit in an oppressive political order, and the superstition of those who congratulated themselves on being free of it. Elsewhere, however, from his early work onwards, he conceived of ways in which 'Superstition with unconscious hand' might 'Seat Reason on her throne'.<sup>11</sup> In 1804, he sketched notes for a work on superstition 'taken in its philos. and most comprehen. sense', to 'trace out & detect its subtle Incarnations & Epiphanies'.<sup>12</sup> Despite the dead ends into which superstitious practice could so obviously lead, in the faculty manifest *in* superstition Coleridge also saw a medium of psychic awakening: a quickening of our powers of apprehension, an opening of the 'inward eye' that

discerns ‘invisible realities or spiritual objects’.<sup>13</sup> The older Coleridge was fond of playing on the etymology of ‘superstition’, as in his marginal note, where the ‘reserve of superstition’ intuits that ‘aliquid *superstat*’ – ‘something stands above’. ‘Superstition’, for Coleridge (as his editors observe), implicitly beholds ‘things standing above yet nevertheless present to the senses’ (*Marginalia*, IV, 579 n). This intuition of a ‘terra incognita’, an unknown ground, *within* our knowledge becomes an animating energy by virtue of its very mystery. Note the defiance of theological or philosophical closure implied in the active role that this ascribes to the unknown – the ‘hidden mystery in every, the minutest, form of existence’.<sup>14</sup> In May 1810, Coleridge wrote in his notebook:

The great difficulty of attacking all Superstition is this—that the superstitious ground their faith in certain awful & profound Truths imperfectly caught hold of—glimpsed—the full understanding of which is the most arduous effect of the most expanded & potent Intellect. (*Notebooks*, III, entry 3808)

Superstition points to something fundamental in the making of the human mind and its relation to its habitat – not least because of the inarticulacy that it embodies: ‘the axioms of the Unthinking are to the philosopher the deepest problems as being the nearest to the mysterious Root and partaking at once of its darkness and its pregnancy’ (*Lay Sermons*, p. 50). For Coleridge, that teeming darkness is the common source of superstition *and* the quickening apprehension of hidden orders of being.

The ‘reserve of superstition’ – both for Graves and Coleridge – entails cognition beyond what we consciously *recognise* as cognition. As Graves puts it:

only a limited amount of factors can be immediately apparent even to an astute and well-informed man; what he calls ‘hunches’ are provided by an inner voice that works from a deeper level of perception—from an awareness of tiny

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straws in the wind which, though real enough, cannot be logically framed. (*Crane Bag*, pp. 213-14)

Graves describes a way of perceiving, and thinking, without knowing: that is, with certitude, but without absolute certainty. It is no coincidence, I contend, that although Graves does not say as much, this corresponds to the process of poetic composition, which involves attending to a great deal more than deliberate calculation. There is an analogy here to Keats's famous aside on the quality of '*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'.<sup>15</sup>

Graves's remark (and the point I am making) also modulates Keats's observation, however: the 'fact & reason' that the poet or querent implicitly seeks are implicit in and ultimately *found* by the activity of intuitive (un)knowing – that is, the act of perception that accommodates more than what is already recognised as 'fact'. Graves goes on to say that the 'inner voice' of supra-cognitive perception confirms itself by directing the mind to a 'recognizable sign' in which it might invest the insight it has already achieved – and hence by which it might speak – however arbitrary the form of that sign (*Crane Bag*, p. 214).

The resonance here with Coleridge's description of the action of superstition in his marginal note is telling – as is Coleridge's own oblique reference to poetic composition in that same note. In defending the 'reserve of superstition', Coleridge refers to the reality and import of the 'form' we give to 'sights' that would otherwise *lack* form: a 'sight' without 'form' is *given* a form – creating, in effect, a medium between the known and the unknown, which partakes of both. Here his language recalls Shakespeare's famous lines on the poetic imagination:

As imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

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Coleridge's language, that is to say, implicates the faculty at work in superstition in both the work of the imagination and the work of the poet. Elsewhere, Coleridge writes of the 'Strange Self-power in the Imagination' when 'sensations have made it their Interpreter' – when 'even to the Anguish or the triumph of the *quasi*-credent Soul', its 'effect shall have *place & Substance & living energy*', and 'shine, like a firstling of creation' (*Notebooks*, III, entry 3547). Poetry itself, for Coleridge, is likewise akin to the latent power it evokes: riffing on August Schlegel in notes for a lecture of 1812, he extols 'the imperishable yet ever wandering Spirit of Poetry', in 'its various metempsychoses, & consequent metamorphoses' [...] 'at each new birth, at each rare avatar, for the human Race winning itself a new body by assimilating to itself the different materials [of] nourishment out of the then circumstances, & new organs of power & action appropriate to the new sphere of its motion & activity'.<sup>16</sup> The 'Spirit of Poetry like all other living Powers', he adds in further notes, 'must embody in order to reveal itself' (*Lectures, 1808-1819*, I, p. 494).

The embodiment of superstition, for Coleridge, similarly reveals something vitally human: an intuitive response to mystery – indeed, the mysterious ground of being – a reality present to the senses that cannot be wholly comprised in sensuous form. As Graves emphasises, this acknowledges the activity and authority of something more than intellect, and in the ongoing manifestation of superstition, in new forms and circumstances, a supra-cognitive perception is at work in the spontaneous life of the psyche, which we can learn to use. For both poets, the 'reserve of superstition' keeps mystery alive as an operative reality in human thought, a mystery that we can think with, whose forms become mediatory agents of the known and the unknown. To put it one way: the unknown receives a body, and the known receives a ghost. The effect is at once unsettling, animating, and for all its hazard, potentially revelatory.

In their different but kindred ways, both Graves and Coleridge participated in, and are still helping to shape, that great revision of the history of spirituality to which I have referred: the awakening

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of a new energy, dissatisfied with Christianity and often indeed with religion itself, in search of a language that is still yet to be found.<sup>17</sup> For both men, however, poetry was fundamental to the renewal at hand – not least because their ideal of poetry is adapted to, and *creates with*, a supra-cognitive sensitivity – embodying, as Coleridge said of Shakespeare, ‘a genial Understanding directing self-consciously a power and a[n] implicit wisdom deeper than Consciousness’ (*Lectures 1808-1819*, I, p. 495). A poem can use the ‘reserve of superstition’, in the sense I have described, to irradiate the known with the unknown, and give the unknown form and presence: to rouse and activate the darker sphere of our knowing, and with it, quicken our powers of attention and apprehension, in the fullest sense of that word.

Thomas Warton, in his *History of English Poetry*, described the Elizabethan era as ‘the most POETICAL age of these annals’, for having produced ‘a sort of civilized superstition’:

The reformation had not yet destroyed every delusion, nor disenchanted all the strong holds of superstition. A few dim characters were yet legible in the mouldering creed of tradition. Every goblin of ignorance did not vanish at the first glimmerings of the morning of science. Reason suffered a few demons still to linger, which she chose to retain in her service under the guidance of poetry.<sup>18</sup>

The demons linger still. In that spirit, I include here a poem of my own, from my recent collection *Maskwork* (Nine Arches Press, 2020), first published in *The Hudson Review* in Spring 2020 (73.1), available online.<sup>19</sup> A poppet is a doll – or an effigy used in witchcraft.

#### A Poppet

When I dug you up  
like a potato,  
you could have been

vegetable, grown  
in earth too long

lost by a girl  
who gave you her name  
and worried her parents  
to death with her love  
for your unstitched eyes

whose loose threads  
look into mine  
as I bath you until  
the water is black  
and your human hair

is chestnut again,  
and the hemp sac  
of your skin is warm  
from the fire I  
nearly put you in.

The embers are cold  
when I think I wake  
to find you folded  
into my bed  
and your voice thrown

to the tilth of my garden  
growing you bone  
by bone with words  
no human breath  
could hold, biting  
my tongue and drawing  
blood that tastes  
wrong as I follow,  
now a father  
to a lost child

and feel small hands  
 push me into  
 fresh-torn ground.  
 When I think I wake,  
 your small hands lift me out.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Graves, *The Crane Bag, and Other Disputed Subjects* (London: Cassell, 1969), p. 203. This paper expands upon the talk I gave at the Robert Graves 125 online celebration, 17 October 2020, and I am grateful to Michael Joseph for the invitation to publish it here.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755, 1773), ed. by Beth Rapp and others (2021). <<https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com>> [Accessed 9 July 2021]. I have excluded Johnson's examples of usage, for which he quotes Milton, Dryden, and the King James version of the Bible (Acts 25:19).

<sup>3</sup> John Aubrey, *Natural History of Wiltshire* (1685), ed. by John Britton (Wiltshire: Wiltshire Topographical Society, 1847), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Aubrey quotes the first part of the following sentence from Pliny's *Natural History*, 18.6.25: '*Ac primum omnium oraculis maiore e parte agemus, quae non in alio vitae genere plura certiorave sunt: cur enim non videantur oracula a certissimo die maximeque veredico usu profecta?*' 'And first of all we will proceed for the most part by the guidance of oracular precepts, which in no other department of life [Pliny is writing about cereal agriculture] are more numerous or more trustworthy – for why not assign oracular value to precepts originating from the infallible test of time and the supremely truthful verdict of experience?' Pliny, *Natural History*, x vols. v, books 17-19, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, 371 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 204-05.

<sup>5</sup> For a useful summary of this development and the scholarship that has addressed it, see Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of*

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*Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 112-31.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 242.

<sup>7</sup> I wonder how widely observed this still is in England.

<sup>8</sup> On Coleridge and superstition more generally, see my *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 30-32 *et passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Scott, *Waverley* (1814), ed. by Andrew Hook (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 191. For a discussion of Coleridge's note in relation to *Waverley*, see Jonathan V. Farina, 'Superstitious Marginalia: Coleridge and *Waverley*', *The Wordsworth Circle* 36.1 (Winter 2005), 29-32.

<sup>10</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, 6 vols. I-II ed. by George Whalley, III-VI ed. by H. J. Jackson and George Whalley (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge, 1980-2001), IV, p. 579.

<sup>11</sup> S. T. Coleridge, 'The Destiny of Nations', in *Poems*, ed. by John Beer (London: Everyman, 1990), p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5 vols., ed. by Kathleen Coburn and others (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge, 1957-2002), II, entry 2060.

<sup>13</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *The Friend*, 2 vols, ed. by Barbara E. Rooke (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge, 1969), I, p. 156.

<sup>14</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, ed. by R. J. White (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge, 1972), p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> John Keats, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819: On Literature*, 2 vols, ed. by R. A. Foakes (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge, 1987), I, pp. 465-66.

<sup>17</sup> For Graves, the White Goddess emerged to fill the void. Coleridge's case is more complicated. While he was an avowed Christian, and sought to revivify spirituality and the idea of religion in Christian terms, his philosophical language – like his poetics – implicitly adapts to a post-religious form: that is, a form (strictly speaking) neither 'religious', nor reducible to a 'secular' idiom. In this respect, his search for the fundamental grounds of religion – and principles capable of withstanding the dehumanising forces of psychic atrophy – assumed another (secret) life, the story of which is yet fully to be told (though I

am working on this). For a primer, however, see my *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination*.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry*, 3 vols (London, 1774-1781), III, pp. 490, 49, 496.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Leadbetter, 'A Poppet', *The Hudson Review*, 73.1(Spring 2020) <<https://hudsonreview.com/2020/04/does-a-poppet-two-lost-things-consistori-del-gai-saber/#.YPg6ZuhKibg>> [Accessed 21 July 2021]