

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 1772-1834
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Article Text:

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), poet, critic, theologian, journalist and philosopher, was born on 21st October 1772 at Ottery St Mary, Devon, the youngest of ten children. His emotional ambivalence towards his mother Ann (née Bowdon) is often considered relevant to the women in his later relationships, dreams and poetry. But he adored his father John, an Anglican vicar and grammar school headmaster, who died in 1781 when Coleridge was only nine years old. A few months later, Coleridge was sent to Christ's Hospital Charity Boarding School in London. To judge from his uncomfortable recollections in 'Frost at Midnight' (1798), he disliked this strict, impersonal institution.

At school, he was introduced to the works of Plato , Virgil , Milton , Shakespeare , Cowper , Thomson and Young , formative reading for the rapacious self-styled 'library cormorant'. As a senior 'Grecian' at the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, Coleridge began to engage with radical politics. His beliefs caused problems at Jesus College, Cambridge, which he entered on a scholarship in October 1791. In 1793, Coleridge's support for suspended anti-Anglican tutor William Frend proved unpopular with both the College and his family, who knew that it could exclude him from university and church vocations. At the end of that year, depressed about family and debt, Coleridge went missing and joined the army under a pseudonym. A few weeks into his traumatic nursing duties, 'Private Silas Tomkyn Comberbache' was rediscovered by his brother George, who gained his discharge, paid off his debts, and directed him back to Cambridge.

Like many dissenters and radicals of his day, Coleridge was by now a Unitarian, eager to practice the faith's socio-political message of perfectibility and brotherhood. On a visit to Oxford in June 1794, he met like-minded Bristol poet Robert Southey . Influenced by the ideas of Rousseau , Godwin and Priestley, they planned to start an egalitarian community in Pennsylvania, U.S.A. To raise funds for their 'Pantisocracy', they co-wrote an historical drama entitled *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794). Under the poetic influence of William Lisle Bowles , Coleridge also penned a series of 'Sonnets on Eminent Characters' for the *Morning Chronicle* . These were later included in

his well-received *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796), his first issue from the press of the Bristol publisher and Unitarian, Joseph Cottle .

Unfortunately, disagreements between Southey and Coleridge dissolved the Pantisocracy plan within a year. Its spirit lingered, though, as in October 1795, Coleridge wed Sara Fricker, one of five sisters from Bristol who had shown interest in becoming Pantisocrats. The marriage came at a busy time for Coleridge, who had been lecturing in Bristol intermittently since January, on politics, religion and the slave trade. In thanks for the lectures, (published in November 1795 as *Conciones ad Populum*), Bristol Unitarians commissioned the famous portrait of Coleridge by Peter Vandyke.

In spite of his non-violent politics, Coleridge was now a suspected Jacobin, under government observation. Undeterred, he founded a politically moderate Unitarian periodical, *The Watchman* (March to May 1796), in order 'That All may know the TRUTH; And that the TRUTH may make us FREE!!' Two years later, this zeal for truth and knowledge gained Coleridge a preacher's post. But after one sermon (later recalled by his erstwhile admirer William Hazlitt in his famous essay *On My First Acquaintance with Poets*), Coleridge decided that he could address a wider audience through his writing. He was assisted by a £150 annuity from Unitarian manufacturer-brothers, Thomas and Josiah Wedgwood.

In September 1796, Sara bore their first child. Hartley (named after the associationist philosopher, David Hartley) was followed by Berkeley (born 1798), Derwent (1800) and Sara (1802). In December, the family moved to Nether Stowey. There, Coleridge enjoyed one of his most creative periods, due in large part to his friendship with William Wordsworth and William's sister Dorothy . From June 1797, they became a dynamic triad of mutual admiration. Coleridge conveyed his contentment in the quietly joyous 'Conversation Poems', 'This Lime Tree Bower' (1797), 'Frost at Midnight' (1798), 'The Nightingale' (1798) and 'Fears in Solitude' (1798). These musings on the fusion of God, Man and Nature give credence to Coleridge's claim that he was now a family man, who had 'snapped his squeaking baby trumpet of sedition' in disgust at French Revolutionary violence.

In November 1797, one abortive collaboration between Coleridge and Wordsworth spawned Coleridge's famous 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. The supernatural symbolism and journey metaphors in this poem have since attracted countless interpretations, but most contemporary critics dismissed the 'Rime' as a far-fetched moral allegory of brotherhood in God. The poem 'Kubla Khan' was also composed during this period. Coleridge later attributed this 'psychological curiosity' to opium-induced dream images. He had used opium -- a common painkiller of the time -- sporadically since the age of eighteen, for toothaches, rheumatism, gout and stomach upsets. It only became an habitual problem two or three years after 'Kubla Khan' was written, by which time Coleridge was suffering the guilt, shame and night-terrors described in 'The Pains of

'Sleep' (1803).

Towards the end of 1798, Coleridge and Wordsworth published some of their poems anonymously, under the title of *Lyrical Ballads*. With its roots in Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), the duo's revolutionary volume encouraged many poets to compose more simply expressed poetry. Although *Lyrical Ballads* is now considered a landmark in English poetry, it initially gained a largely negative critical response, which included a hostile review from Robert Southey, who knew of Coleridge's involvement.

Lyrical Ballads appeared in September, just before Coleridge went to Germany. At the University of Göttingen, he learned German and read Lessing's criticism, Eichhorn's biblical exegesis, the poetry of Bürger and Klopstock, Schiller's drama, and Böhme's mystical writings. He later read the Schlegel brothers' criticism and the philosophy of Kant and Schelling. When blended with the elements of Coleridge's philosophy that drew upon British empiricism, these works informed his later inquiries into 'Naturphilosophie', biblical history, aesthetics, and the concept of organic artistic processes.

Coleridge returned from Germany in July 1799, three months after he heard of his son Berkeley's death. His delay upset Sara greatly. During this period of domestic strain and opium ingestion for pneumonia, Coleridge visited the Wordsworths in Sockburn (October). There he met Sara Hutchinson (whom he referred to as 'Asra'), the intelligent, indulgent sister of William's fiancée, Mary. Captivated, Coleridge left reluctantly for London in November to take a job at the *Morning Post*.

Coleridge had contributed to the *Post* since January 1798. The editor, Daniel Stuart, valued him enormously and offered him a share in the paper in March 1800. Coleridge declined, yearning to return to Asra, Wordsworth and the Lake District. But he continued to contribute essays, mainly on political topics, and later worked on Stuart's new journal *The Courier* (1808-1817: see *Essays on His Times*, 1978). Although Coleridge wrote primarily from a liberal political stance, his 1811 pro-government articles on war policy gained him the reputation of 'turncoat' amongst young liberals such as Hazlitt.

After a temporary separation from Sara, who was frustrated by Coleridge's constant references to Asra and Wordsworth, the Coleridges moved to Keswick in the Lake District in July 1800. As attested by the notebooks that he kept from circa 1795 until his death, Coleridge felt inspired in the Lake District. While walking, he documented the provocative scenery in diagrams and perceptive, sensitive prose. Coleridge's notebooks are integral to an appreciation of his thought. These literary mines yield verse, sketches, and vital descriptions of new sensory excitements, even during periods of apparent intellectual stagnation (e.g. 1804-06).

The scenery of the Lakes influenced Part Two of 'Christabel', a supernatural verse narrative begun in 1798. This being his projected contribution to the new edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800/01), Coleridge felt betrayed when Wordsworth suddenly rejected the poem as 'unsuitable'. He took to long winter walking expeditions that inflamed his chronic rheumatism, inducing him to take large doses of opium to counter physical and emotional pain.

At the turn of the century, Coleridge was depressed and feeling detached from both nature and mankind. In spite of successful contributions to the *Morning Post*, his confidence in his writing and worth had been badly shaken. He made efforts to improve his life, attending the science lectures of friend Humphry Davy at the Royal Institution in London (January 1802), and touring Wales (November 1802) and Scotland (August-September 1803). But, as the darkly comic 'Enbro' Epitaph' (1803) suggests, Coleridge's illnesses worsened. His opium intake became intolerable to himself, his family and friends, and his already poor relations with Sara deteriorated as he fell in love with Asra. The despair of these four years pours from his verse 'Letter to Sara Hutchinson' (April 1802), the most concise expression of his alienation. Too personal in its original form, the poem was revised and published six months later in the *Morning Post* as 'Dejection: An Ode'. Around this time, Coleridge began to seriously re-explore his Anglican roots, yearning for a personal God.

Suffering illness again in 1804, Coleridge left England for the warmer climes of Malta, where he took various administrative posts at the British High Commission (July 1804-September 1805). He kept notebooks and wrote essays during this period, but some were burned in a plague scare and many were lost overboard on his return voyage. The surviving 'fly-catchers' reveal that he enjoyed extensive travels in Syracuse, Naples, Rome, Florence, Pisa, Leghorn and Sicily. Although Coleridge was now locked in opium addiction, his time abroad was a comparative period of freedom.

A few months after his return to domestic stress in England (August 1806), Coleridge separated informally from Sara. They would not meet wholly amicably again until November 1822. From then on, his home life was comprised of intermittent residence with friends and admirers. From December 1806 to April 1807 he stayed with the Wordsworths at Coleorton, where he first heard Wordsworth recite his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*. In awe and sadness, he penned 'To William Wordsworth', a homage to his old collaborator's apparently untouchable ability.

On Coleridge's return to London, journalism and lecturing became his main source of income. To supplement his writing for the *Courier*, Coleridge gave eighteen lectures at the Royal Institution on 'Poetry and the Principles of Taste' (January-June 1808). These were begun during a period of illness, which was worsened by his sparse living arrangements in the *Courier* building. In September, he cancelled the remaining lectures and returned to the Lake District, where he defied

odds of expense, location and illness to produce a new weekly paper, *The Friend* (June 1809-March 1810), an eclectic mix of 'Literary, Moral and Political' essays. Critics initially disliked its choppy style and structure. After revision and the inclusion of essays on aesthetics and linguistics, however, *The Friend* became popular in new periodical and book forms (June 1812; November 1818).

Coleridge returned south for good in October 1810. Relations with Asra were broken by the strain of unrequited love. In addition, his friendship with Wordsworth was temporarily severed when Basil Montagu broke Wordsworth's confidence to tell Coleridge that Wordsworth thought him an 'Absolute Nuisance'. (The poets' friendship was eventually patched up in 1812 by Charles Lamb, Coleridge's life-long schoolfriend.)

Coleridge's extended family now began to record his *Table Talk*, a mammoth collation of wisdom (published 1836). Coleridge's learning went public again in late 1811, with the first of seven series of lectures that lasted until Spring 1819. He expounded the theories that he had learned in Germany (including those pertaining to artistic unity) in talks on *Belles Lettres*, Culture, Education, European Literature, the French Revolution, Napoleon, Philosophy, Taste, Drama and Poetry (especially Shakespeare, Cervantes, Dante, Spenser and Milton). Coleridge also achieved some success as a playwright when his tragedy *Remorse* (a rewriting of his earlier play *Osorio*) ran for twenty nights at Drury Lane (January-February 1813).

The lectures attracted widespread and serious attention, and helped to spark a revival in Shakespeare studies. The 1814 series was disrupted, however, by Coleridge's opium habit and suicidal depression. Just after this period, he wrote the moving poem 'Human Life: On the Denial of Immortality'. In December 1814, he moved to Wiltshire with the Morgans, with whom he had resided since April 1812. There, partly as a counter-response to Wordsworth's *Excursion* (1814) and *collected Poems* (1815), Coleridge dictated his *Biographia Literaria*, which was published in 1817 along with his own collection of poems, *Sibylline Leaves*. As well as autobiographical reminiscence, *Biographia* contained influential ideas on the 'primary' and 'secondary' imagination, discussion of 'the nature and claims of poetic diction', and an analytical appraisal of Wordsworth's work. Initial critical indifference and scorn towards *Biographia* turned to disgust when Thomas De Quincey and Hazlitt alleged that its complex philosophical passages were plagiarized from German works. This was arguably true, but Coleridge the 'divine ventriloquist' maintained (with some justification) that he was merely introducing complex continental ideas into Britain.

Before this debacle erupted, Coleridge received a literary grant, and a gift of money from Byron, who encouraged him to publish '*Christabel*' (1816). Around this time, Coleridge moved into the London home of Dr and Mrs James Gillman, with whom he was to remain for the rest of his life. The medical care and mental stimulation of the Gillmans and the attention of a new 'disciple',

Joseph H. Green, nurtured Coleridge's creativity. In 1816, he wrote *Theory of Life* (published 1848) which explored evolution, the mechanisms of animal life, and their relationship to the soul. He also submitted a 'Treatise on Method' to the *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana* .

From Spring 1822, Coleridge hosted informal discussions on philosophy, linguistics and religion (ideas from these talks were drafted in 1828 and published as *Logic* in 1981). Coleridge's private forays into these subjects included the Biblical exegesis and unorthodox explorations of the Trinity in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (published 1840 and 1979), the drafts for his *Logosophia / Opus Maximum* (unpublished), and the post-1827 notebooks (unpublished). In the public domain, Coleridge enhanced his reputation as a social and religious thinker with his influential *Statesman's Manual* (1816). This suggested that the Bible may be [...]the Best Guide to Political Skill and Foresight, an idea reiterated in his second *Lay Sermon* (1817). In 1825, he published his controversial masterpiece *Aids to Reflection* , which guided young men through religious doubts and issues on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. His final, challenging public word on religion and politics came in *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1829), which advocated closer connections between the two institutions and civil rights for Catholics. In 1824, Coleridge's efforts were acknowledged with a Fellowship and annuity from the Royal Society of Literature.

During his years with the Gillmans, Coleridge explored his turbulent emotional life in many notable poems, including 'Limbo' (1817) and 'Youth and Age' (1823-1832). 'Work without Hope' (1825) was included in the compendium *Bijou* in 1828, the year that also saw publication of his *Poetical Works* (3 vols). The later poems and notebooks demonstrate undiminished mental agility despite serious physical illness. Coleridge fought his illness by walking around his home in Highgate, and in June 1828, one last great physical effort took him and Wordsworth on a six-week tour of the Netherlands and Rhine.

Coleridge died on 25th July 1834, a controversial figure but with many admirers. His early influence is found in the Shakespearean criticism of Matthew Arnold and the religious ideas of F.D. Maurice , James Marsh, and J.H. Newman (see Stephen Prickett, 1976). His reputation as a poet and a religious thinker grew during the nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1842, the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson reported that *Aids to Reflection* sold by the shelf-full, and in 1853, W.G.T. Shedd published the first American Complete Works...: with an introductory essay upon [Coleridge's] philosophical and theological opinions (7 vols). John Stuart Mill eulogized Coleridge's 'intelligent...poetic criticism' ('Coleridge', *London and Westminster Review* , 1840), identifying him as one of two 'seminal minds' of the century. (The other was Coleridge's ideological opposite, Jeremy Bentham -- see ed. F.R. Leavis (1967) and Christopher Turk (1988)).

Other retrospective commentaries, however, disparaged Coleridge. Thomas De Quincey highlighted his opium problem (1834/1970), and Thomas Carlyle (1851) declared that his 'express

contributions to poetry, philosophy, or any specific province of human literature or enlightenment, had been small and sadly intermittent'. Early twentieth-century critics Irving Babbitt (1929) and T.S. Eliot (1933) endorsed Carlyle's evaluation.

In 1927, John Livingston Lowes challenged this negative judgment, and sought to redress the biographical emphasis of Victorian 'Lives'. In his famous study, he called attention to the 'workings' and 'practice' of Coleridge's poetic imagination by tracing literary sources for the imagery of 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Ancient Mariner'. Less rigorously, he also resorted to speculating on psychological influences for the poems. In 1934, I.A. Richards argued for a more strictly critical approach to Coleridge's writing. His inspiration was Coleridge the linguist and theoretician, who had tried to expose and correct abusers of 'the blessed machine of language'. Appropriating and developing Coleridge's concept of 'practical criticism', Richards studied 'the behaviour of words' in Coleridge's poetry. This self-contained, New Critical approach yielded enriching close-readings and utilized an aspect of Coleridge's critical theory. But it underplayed Coleridge's symbolism (see Robert Penn Warren on 'The Ancient Mariner', 1946), and excluded vital aspects of his science, politics and prose.

Other critics combined New Criticism with large-scale history of ideas and principles of systematic unity. M.H. Abrams (1953, 1971) examined Coleridge in the light of a 'comprehensive intellectual tendency' in the period and a secularized Romantic imagination, while Thomas McFarland (1969) read his work in the context of European Romantic thought. Such assumptions effectively excused issues of Coleridge's German plagiarism.

Challenging this essentialist approach, Jonathan Culler and Jerome McGann pointed out in the 1980s that Coleridge's *Biographia*, 'Principles of Method' and Shakespeare lectures were themselves the source of Modernist assumptions about his 'holistic principles' and 'organic processes of artistic development'. Critics such as James D. Boulger (1961), J.R. Barth S.J. (1969) and J.S. Cutsinger (1987) had applied variants of these principles to Coleridge's theology. Similar notions had informed discussion of Coleridge's imagination by Owen Barfield (1971) and Barth (1977). An alternative approach, however, argued that these projections often made Coleridge's work appear more cogent and systematic than it may have been. As Kathleen Coburn noted (1979), the unfamiliar and divided are major themes in Coleridge's work. With this in mind, the disjointed quality of his ideas -- even if not deliberate -- need not be seen as negative (see Seamus Perry, 1999).

Coleridge was thus ripe for deconstructive analysis, which was provided by critics such as Stephen Bygrave, Jerome Christensen, A.C. Goodson, John A. Hodgson, Jean-Pierre Mileur and Tillotama Rajan. These critics examined contradictions and unconventional structure in Coleridge's style and content; tensions between his language and authorial intention (e.g. *Biographia*'s plagiarisms and

its theories of the self-reliant, creative secondary imagination); and his many revisions and fragments. McFarland (1981) also complemented his earlier organicist view with a study in this vein. Such approaches engaged with Coleridge's sense of alienation and flux, and his lifelong concentration on dynamism and growth rather than stasis. His 'postmodern' transgressing of genre boundaries were discussed by K.M. Wheeler (1981) and Jon Klancher (in Rajan and Wright, 1998), while David Jasper (1985 and ed.1986) looked at Coleridge's perceptions of the relationships between art and religion.

New Historicism recognized the limits of deconstruction by seeking to locate a definite idea of Coleridge in the context of his time. Prompted by E.S. Shaffer's revival of 'High Criticism' (1975), Kelvin Everest (1979) brought Coleridge's literary audience, personal experiences, and the social events of 1795-98 to bear on the 'Conversation Poems'. Nigel Leask (1988) used a contextual approach to assess Coleridge's cultural politics in the light of tensions between his material/civic and metaphysical 'Imaginations'. James McKusick (1986) employed a variant approach in his examination of Coleridge's linguistics, while Jennifer Ford's (1998) historicist view of Coleridge's 'medical imagination' (including opium and dreaming) balanced the biographical and psychoanalytic accounts of M.H. Abrams (1934), Patricia Adair (1967) and Molly Lefebure (1974).

Varying schools of feminist criticism produced studies by Diane Hoeveler, Lore Metzger, Camille Paglia, Karen Swann, Anya Taylor and Anca Vlasopolos. Amongst other topics, these critics discussed the female characters and the language of 'Kubla Khan', 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel'.

Useful studies of Coleridge's linguistics, philosophy, politics, science, and relationship with Wordsworth include those by J.A. Appleyard (1965), R. Ashton (1980), T. Fulford (1991), T. Levere (1981), P. Magnuson (1988), R. Modiano (1985), J. Morrow (1990), J.H. Muirhead (1930), L. Newlyn (1986), M. Paley (1996), M.A. Perkins (1994), S. Prickett (1976), N. Roe (1988) and I. Wylie (1989). Good collections of critical essays are edited by R.L. Brett (1971), D. Sultana (1981), Gravil, Newlyn and Roe (1985), D. Jasper (1986), C. Gallant (1989), Gravil and Lefebure (1990), Kitson and Corns (1991), Fulford and Paley (1993), and L. Orr (1994). The latter has an extensive bibliography. The undogmatic studies of John Beer and Kathleen Coburn deserve special attention in any examination of Coleridge.

The generally favourable biographies of W.J. Bate (1968), Rosemary Ashton (1996) and Richard Holmes (1999) are offset by Norman Fruman's controversial study (1971). The outdated accounts of Coleridge in Malta and Italy (Donald Sultana (1969) and Alethea Hayter (1973)) were reassessed by Edoardo Zuccato (1996), who also reworked the established constructions of Coleridge as 'Germanic'. Standard editions are the *Collected Letters* ed. E.L. Griggs (1956-1971), *Notebooks* ed. K. Coburn (1957-), *Poetical Works* ed. E.H. Coleridge (1912), and *Collected Works* (Princeton, 1969-

). There are major manuscript holdings in the Bodleian Library (Oxford), British Library (London), and Victoria College Library (Toronto).

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