



# Coleridge's Early Empiricism

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This book is drawn from material in my PhD thesis 'Wordsworth's Empiricist Poetic and its Influence in the Twentieth Century'.

# Coleridge's Early Empiricism

This study examines the influence of empiricism on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry up until 1800, at which time he deserted it for transcendentalism. This is not to suggest that he was completely an empiricist before 1800, but that his empiricism was somewhat tempered by transcendentalist influences. Therefore, the relationship between "empiricism" and "transcendentalism" in his thinking with regard to poetic composition is problematical. Coleridge became a transcendentalist poet and thinker, whose *Biographia Literaria* was partly intended to demonstrate the malign effect of the Locke tradition on poetry. Even so, that book is partly a work of self-correction. There is ample evidence of Coleridge's immersion in empiricist philosophy in the 1790s, as well as in the kind of scientific enquiry that was thought to be congenial to that philosophy. The sway of David Hartley, in particular, over his thoughts is prominently demonstrated by the choice of a name for his son.

However, even though he was reading Hartley (or attending lectures on science), he was also reading the Neoplatonists. Scholars such as Kathleen Wheeler emphasise the fact that the latter kind of influence was operative throughout the 1790s. From one point of view, it is not entirely clear how much of a separation between these apparently different influences Coleridge would have perceived at that time. One form of "natural supernaturalism" to be found in the Romantic period is that which makes it uncertain whether contemporary discoveries about electricity and magnetism are not really just the identification of what the Neoplatonists and other ancient thinkers had conceived in terms of the subtle materiality comprised in phrases such as "animal spirits". Indeed, it could be claimed that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* exploits just such an uncertainty. Certainly, Kelvin Everest, by contrast with Kathleen Wheeler, is able to claim that there is nothing in the 'conversation poems' that does not fit firmly with the Locke tradition.

However, the fact that there is disagreement about such questions is partly due to the ambiguity of the poems of the 1790s themselves where one finds a strong emphasis on the modifying power of the mind. Consequently, the progress of the speaker's consciousness in 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' is from a kind of egotistical blindness to his surroundings, caused by self-pity because he has not been able to go for a walk with his friends, to the pleased perception that the lime-tree bower in which he is trapped is itself beautiful. At the same time, the pleasant descriptions that convey the beauty of the natural world offer a kind of detailed word-painting that one can relate to the "empiricist" Coleridge. Nevertheless, the forms of Nature are of 'such hues / As clothe the Almighty Spirit'. In addition, while the formulation is consistent with Deism, it is also obviously Berkeleyan, and the implications of Berkeley's idealist development of empiricism are capable of being developed towards transcendentalism. This is indeed the direction in which Coleridge himself traveled, and in retrospect this is not surprising, since the poems of the 1790s are so expressive not only of the transforming power of the imagination, but also of its fundamental role in human experience. Coleridge was prepared for Kant and German philosophy before he came to them, and his empiricism is therefore complex and perhaps in need of qualification.

Before his German visit Coleridge's exposure to philosophy had comprised mainly studies of Plato and the Neoplatonists; Christian mystics such as William Law; and the English divines; all mixed in with the philosophical ideas of Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Condillac and Hartley.<sup>1</sup> Much has been made of the Neoplatonist significance in *Religious Musings* to argue that Coleridge was mainly an idealist during the 1790s.<sup>2</sup> But we must not forget that his main philosophical reading at the time the poem was written were works by Newton, Locke, Berkeley and Priestley.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, all of his substantial poems were written while he was under the influence of the empiricists.<sup>4</sup> These included 'The Eolian Harp', 'Kubla Khan', 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel': all written before he deserted empiricist philosophy in 1801.<sup>5</sup> As *Religious Musings* was written before 1801 we, therefore, have to discount a significant Neoplatonist influence. Kelvin Everest observes:

Coleridge shared the Unitarian wariness of mysticism and *Religious Musings* itself offers a good example of the rational, scientific ‘proof’ that a Hartley or Priestley provided of the millennium’s ultimate inevitability.<sup>6</sup>

He goes on to say that,

Coleridge describes early in the poem the process by which the soul develops into a selfless identity with God. [...] The account itself seems to derive in part from a neo-platonic source, but Coleridge was anxious to correct this impression in 1797.<sup>7</sup>

He then quotes the following extract from the 1797 text of the poem:

Lovely was the death  
Of Him whose life was love! Holy with power  
He on the thought-benighted Sceptic beamed  
Manifest Godhead, melting into day  
What floating mists of dark idolatry  
Broke and misshaped the omnipresent Sire:  
And first by Fear uncharmed the drowsed Soul.  
Till of its nobler nature it ‘gan feel  
Dim recollections; and thence soared to Hope,  
Strong to believe whate’er of mystic good  
The Eternal dooms for His immortal sons.  
From Hope and firmer Faith to perfect Love  
Attracted and absorbed: and cantered there  
God only to behold, and know, and feel,  
Till by exclusive consciousness of God  
All self-annihilated it shall make  
God its Identity: God all in all!  
We and our Father one!<sup>8</sup>

(28-45)

Then quotes Coleridge’s footnote to line 43 of the poem in support of the idea that Coleridge was reluctant to be associated with mystical beliefs:

See this *demonstrated* by Hartley, vol. I, p.114, and vol. 2. p.329. See it likewise proved, and freed from the charge of Mysticism, by Pistorius in his Notes and Additions to part second of Hartley on Man, Addition the 18th, the 653rd page of the third volume of Hartley, Octavo Edition.<sup>9</sup>

On his return in 1799 after ten months of study in Germany, Coleridge’s aim was to ‘make poetry an instrument of metaphysical research’.<sup>10</sup> However, his mystical idealism is more prominent in theories that he formulated after 1800. As Norman Fruman notes in his biography of Coleridge:

In 1796 the ‘illustrious sage’ was still ‘the most unintelligible Emanuel Kant’. It was not until at least 1801, well after his return from Germany, that Coleridge began a thorough study of

Kant.<sup>11</sup>

Before 1800, he was ‘still firmly rooted in empiricism’.<sup>12</sup> What primarily motivated and informed his poetic ideas during the 1790s was the empiricism of Hartley. Coleridge was deeply influenced by Hartley, as Dorothy M. Emmet observes: ‘There was a stage in Coleridge’s development when Hartley was his mentor, suggesting a way of trying to understand the working of the mind’.<sup>13</sup> She quotes the following lines dedicated to Hartley from *Religious Musings*:

he of mortal kind  
Wisest, he first who marked the ideal tribes  
Up the fine fibres through the sentient brain.<sup>14</sup>

(368-70)

She points out that these lines refer to Hartley’s notion of a physiological process causally linking mind and matter: ‘Note “ideal tribes” for nervous currents conveying sensations; “ideas” were held to be somehow derivative of these’.<sup>15</sup> She then explains why Coleridge was so enthralled with this aspect of Hartley:

Coleridge had an active interest all through his life in physiology and chemistry; he was fascinated as a schoolboy in his brother Luke’s medical studies; he kept this interest at Cambridge, and followed it more thoroughly when he went to Göttingen; he kept up a friendship and correspondence with Sir Humphrey Davy, and took interest in his experiments on respiration and gases. So it is quite untrue to think that he swam off into speculative philosophy, and had no interest in the scientific and experimental study of mind and body.<sup>16</sup>

Any reservations Coleridge had about Hartley’s ideas were not to do with their being too empiricist but, as Emmet notes, their being not empiricist enough: ‘His quarrel with the Hartleian sensationalist theory of the compounding of ideas was not that it was empirical but that it was untrue to experience’.<sup>17</sup> She quotes him as saying in *Anima Poetae*:

How opposite to nature, and to the fact to talk of the ‘one moment’ of Hume, of our whole being an aggregate of successive single sensations! Who ever felt a single sensation? Is not every one at the same moment conscious that there co-exist a thousand others, a darker shade or less light, even as when I fix my attention on a white house or a grey bare hill or rather long ridge that runs out of sight each way.<sup>18</sup>

Coleridge is saying that the associationist idea that the incremental accumulation of sensations affects conscious apprehension of the physical world is not, in fact, the true way that this apprehension occurs. Rather the objects of sensation are simultaneously apparent to the organs of perception as a gestalt. Therefore, to Coleridge, the weakness in Hartley’s associationism is that it is not based on an accurate observation of the perceptual process. Emmet notes that,

Coleridge was seeing the limitations of this [Hartley’s theory] when it was the fashionable philosophy in this country. And he was doing so not because he had imbibed speculative notions from Germany, but because it was untrue to what he discovered in his own experience.<sup>19</sup>



The misconception that Coleridge was indifferent to the physical world is partly the result of projecting backwards onto his 1790s incarnation his later Kantian influenced theories.<sup>20</sup>

Of Coleridge's eagerness to engage with the physical world Trevor Levere notices:

Coleridge was a brilliant observer of the minutiae of nature. He perceived and recorded details, while seeking to comprehend their significance through their interrelations within the web of nature.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, Humphrey House remarks that by under emphasising Coleridge's regard for the external world,

we run the risk of diverting attention from some of his most characteristic strengths as a writer—from his power of detailed poetic description of objects in nature; from his power of attuning moods of emotion to landscape and movements of weather; of using the shapes and shifts and colours of nature as symbols of emotional and mental states. Even his critical idealism, whether expressed in poems or in his more technical philosophy, is grounded in a minute analysis of the phenomena of sense.<sup>22</sup>

He notices that 'one is surprised over and over again by the combination of delicacy and strength with which Coleridge can handle visual detail in his poems'.<sup>23</sup> House mentions how this attention to detail in 'Frost at Midnight' achieves an expressionistic affect:

In the poem 'Frost at Midnight' [...] several different kinds of experience are given outwardly in detail and are then drawn in to a centre, first in the room and then in the consciousness. And by this means we are given an extraordinary living impression of the whole personality, together with its context; of the mind projected outwards into the detail and then contracting onto itself so that the context is back-coloured by the prevailing emotion.<sup>24</sup>

Although firmly grounded upon empiricist principles, this ability of Coleridge to transform basic sensual data into something more than their crude significance is to be credited.

Via an examination of two of Dorothy Wordsworth's descriptive journal entries and their influence upon Coleridge's poem 'Christabel' (written three months after the entries were made), House further demonstrates the transformative power that Coleridge frequently utilised. He quotes the following entry from Dorothy's Journal dated 25 January 1798: 'The sky spread over with one continuous cloud, whitened by the light of the moon [...]'.<sup>25</sup> Then the entry for 31 January 1798: 'When we left home the moon immensely large, the sky scattered over with clouds. These soon closed in, contracting the dimensions of the moon without concealing her'.<sup>26</sup> Then he quotes the following lines from the Gutch Memorandum Book:

Behind the thin  
Grey cloud that covered but not hid the sky  
The round full moon looked small.<sup>27</sup>

Then these lines from Part I of 'Christabel':

Is the night chilly and dark?

The night is chilly, but not dark.  
The thin grey cloud is spread on high,  
It covers but not hides the sky.  
The moon is behind, and at the full;  
And yet she looks both small and dull.<sup>28</sup>

(I, 14-19)

House points out that although Coleridge has appropriated Dorothy's observation and transferred it into his poem he has in the process,

very much modified his own first verse draft in the Gutch book. Especially by adding the moon's dullness [...] he has increased the mysteriousness and vagueness of the midnight light.<sup>29</sup>

This element in Coleridge's treatment of sensual data should not allow us to forget that this transformative power stands ultimately upon a firm conviction in the importance of physical objects in nature; the perception of which Coleridge still regards as valuable. Without such an empiricist conviction, it would be difficult for him to have utilised the raw materials of experience to achieve the affect that he has in these lines from 'Christabel'.

Of Coleridge's empiricism House notes: 'He is far more alert and sensitive to the modes in which sense-experience conditions the life of the mind than most technical philosophers',<sup>30</sup> and: 'The more one reads Coleridge's descriptions and dwells on them, the less easy it is to be convinced that he ever needed Dorothy Wordsworth as his tutor in seeing'.<sup>31</sup> Along with:

The selections from the Note-Books given in *Anima Poetae*, and even in *Inquiring Spirit*, do not fairly represent the frequency of such entries as this:

Black round Ink-spots from 5 to 18 in the decaying Leaf of the Sycamore.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, his interest in science was also of some importance to his poetry. In *Religious Musings*, he mentions approvingly such notable scientific figures as Newton, Hartley and Priestly.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, his social circle consisted of either scientists or those interested in it such as Thomas Beddoes who made his library of scientific books available to Coleridge.<sup>34</sup> In addition, Levere quotes him as saying: 'Without natural philosophy and without the sciences which led to the knowledge of objects without us, man himself would not be man',<sup>35</sup> adding that for Coleridge,

science, through its foundation in facts and its informing structure of ideas and laws, related mind to nature, the ideal of the real [...]. Science, in short, was fundamental in Coleridge's thought.<sup>36</sup>

Given these particulars his empiricism should therefore not surprise us. Nor should it be surprising that he may have held a biological conception of mind.

In support of this possibility, Alan Richardson cites cognitive psychologist Allan Paivo's observation that Coleridge's narrative of 'Kubla Khan' reveals, 'its intuitive glimpse into the fundamental "duality" that empirical research would later establish between the visual systems, supporting two distinct "modes of

thought””.<sup>37</sup> For Richardson,

what Coleridge describes in the introductory notice to *Kubla Khan* might be seen as the most spectacular psychophysiological experiment of his career, [...] And when read against the background of Coleridge’s fraught relation to contemporary biological accounts of mind, the introductory note becomes a still more remarkable document than before. [...] Moreover [it gives] aid and comfort to the materialist adversary. [And] all but guaranteed that *Kubla Khan* would become an object lesson for the biological study of psychology and an irresistible subject for the psychological study of literature.<sup>38</sup>

Kenneth Burke comes close to suggesting that ‘Kubla Khan’ is a mimesis of the thinking process in that it is,

in effect a poeticized psychology detailing not what the reader is to see but what *mental* states he is thus empathically and sympathetically *imitating* as he reads.<sup>39</sup>

Because of this, the thinking process itself has become objectified in an attempt to render it as tangible to sense experience as are the other objects in nature.

The “biological” aspect of Coleridge’s poetry (i.e. its formal structure mirroring the biological rhythms of the body) is articulated by Albert Gérard in his essay, ‘The Systolic Rhythm: The Structure of Coleridge’s Conversation Poems’. Gérard notes that ‘The Eolian Harp’, ‘Frost at Midnight’, ‘Fears in Solitude’ and ‘Reflections of having left a Place of Retirement’ express a systolic rhythm: a process of contraction and expansion.<sup>40</sup> Of ‘The Eolian Harp’:

We can observe a heartbeat rhythm of systole and diastole, contraction and expansion, in which the poet’s attention is wandering to and fro between his concrete, immediate experience and the wide and many-faceted world of the non-self [nature, God, etc] [...] the self to which the poet finally turns back is not the same self from which he had started: it has been enriched, heightened and uplifted by the various inner and outer experiences to which it has submitted and from which it now emerges with what the poet considers to be a deeper and more accurate knowledge of the universe and of his place in it.<sup>41</sup>

The most obvious instance of this is in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison’ where we see the poet’s self-consciousness directed outwards to contemplate his friends and their present activities. We can see this in action in the opening lines that could be seen as the first expansion:

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,  
This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost  
Beauties and feelings, such as would have been  
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age  
Had dimm’d mine eyes to blindness! They, meanwhile,  
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,  
On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,  
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,  
To that still roaring dell, of which I told<sup>42</sup>

(1-9)

From this overview, there is a contraction as the poet returns his focus to the landscape where he over describes it in the following manner:

The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,  
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;  
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock  
Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash,  
Unsun'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves  
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,  
Fann'd by the water-fall!<sup>43</sup>

(10-16)

Again, we have an expansion:

Now, my friends emerge  
Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again  
The many-steepled tract magnificent  
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,  
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up  
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles  
Of purple shadow!<sup>44</sup>

(20-26)

In a letter to Thomas Poole on 16 October 1797, Coleridge made the following comment that is often brought into play to argue against Coleridge being an empiricist:

My mind had been habituated *to the vast* [and] I never regarded *my senses* in any way as the criteria of my belief. I regulated all my creeds by my conceptions not by my *sight*.<sup>45</sup>

This statement seems at odds with what Coleridge has written elsewhere—and especially from the evidence for his empiricism that we find in his conversation poems. In 'The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-Tree' we can see that Coleridge, far from being 'habituated to the vast', is immersed in the commonplace panorama of nature with its: 'Fields, forests, ancient mountains, ocean, sky'. Moreover, the importance of sensual impression is emphasised with: 'The finer the sense for the beautiful and the lovely, and the fairer and lovelier the object presented to the sense; the more exquisite the individual's capacity of joy'. This pleasure with sensual impression is further expressed in a letter to his brother, George, dated 10 March 1798:

I love fields & woods & mounta[ins] with almost a visionary fondness—and because I have found benevolence & quietness growing within me as that fondness [has] increased, therefore I should wish to be the means of implanting it in others.<sup>46</sup>

We see, then, that Coleridge's remark: 'I never regarded my senses in any way as the criteria of my belief'

does not sit too comfortably with his attitude in this poem. Of the sentence quoted above from the letter to Poole, House (quoting from ‘Solitary Date-Tree’) contends:

That sentence has been quoted over and over again as if it were the most fitting and almost adequate introduction to the study of Coleridge’s mind and habits of vision; but it leads people to forget that he also wrote that one of his greatest qualities was ‘delight in little things’, the kind of delight which belonged to ‘the buoyant child surviving in the man’.<sup>47</sup>

Delighting in ‘little things’ is certainly something that was not on Coleridge’s mind when he wrote the following, also from the letter to Poole:

Those who have been led to the same truths step by step thro’ the constant testimony of the senses, seem to me to want a sense which I possess—They contemplate nothing but *parts*—and all *parts* are necessarily little—and the Universe to them is but a mass of *little things*.<sup>48</sup>

Richardson notes further ambivalences in Coleridge’s thinking, this time concerning his attitude towards the mechanistic model of mind as opposed to the more “organic” conception: ‘Materialist, naturalistic, and embodied notions of the psyche would continue to play an ambiguous role in Coleridge’s thinking throughout his career’.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, this tension is evident, as Richardson further notes, in Coleridge’s attitude, in 1796, towards Erasmus Darwin, whom he mocks for his atheism; while, as John Beer argues, Coleridge drew heavily on Darwin’s *Zoonomia*, during this same period, for insights into the active conception of mind.<sup>50</sup>

How can these various divergent elements in our reading of Coleridge be reconciled? With regard to Coleridge appearing enthralled with material phenomena on the one hand, and almost shunning them on the other, one suggestion by J. A. Appleyard is interesting. He begins by acknowledging that Coleridge’s earliest philosophical theories were derived from associationist psychology and that even after he rejected it, ‘the clarification of the relationship of external nature to mind and imagination was one of the central problems of his philosophy’.<sup>51</sup> He suggests that the ‘notion of objectivity involved here’ may depend upon the understanding of the word “empirical” as it applies to Coleridge.<sup>52</sup> He regards Coleridge as probably rejecting its positivist implications but sees no reason why his experiences (mental, spiritual and physical) could not similarly be labelled “empirical”—and, therefore, “objective”.<sup>53</sup> This approach does harmonise the various empiricist and idealist strands co-existing in Coleridge’s thought. As Appleyard stresses:

This gap between an insight capable of grasping a “vast” truth or an ineffable feeling and, on the other hand, the sense knowledge of the “rationally educated” which contemplates only parts or little things is basic to Coleridge’s thought.<sup>54</sup>

However, a more comprehensive explanation for the contradictions in Coleridge’s thought has been posited by Seamus Perry in *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*. Perry’s thesis is that,

Coleridge’s thought is best understood, not as the solution to a *problem*, but as the experience and exploration of a *muddle*. That sounds derogatory, but I don’t mean it to be: in fact, I mean to be quite laudatory. For it is arguable that certain kinds of muddle are entirely respectable; and the proper task of criticism, in that case, would not be an attempt at the *solution* of the muddle (for that would be to mistake it for a problem), but rather a description of the particular brand of indecision that constitutes it.<sup>55</sup>

He postulates that Coleridge's practice of collecting incongruent fragments of truth scattered through systems,

means that philosophical positions ostensibly passed through are not, in practice, discarded (as someone learning the truth about oxidation would properly jettison the phlogiston theory); typically they are kept current in his thinking, running in incongruous, if notionally inferior, parallel to the new line. But the attractions of the old theory, which were, after all, perfectly genuine, are always liable to reassert themselves; and so comes about the kind of muddlesome doubleness I am taking about.<sup>56</sup>

Consequently, in much of Coleridge's writing 'you find not simply a concept at work, but a concept and its alternative or counter-concept.'<sup>57</sup> Perry sees this pluralism as an expression of Coleridge's belief that humans have a spiritual instinct to seek unity.<sup>58</sup> Perry notes that,

Coleridge's thinking habitually seeks to correct into oneness the apparently incorrigible plurality continually rediscovered in the sharpness of his senses; while [...] in the teeth of his commitment to universality and oneness, diversity and particularity continue to exert their interest—so that, in practice, the unity which he proclaims so vociferously is typically submerged by the protracted exhibition of the contradictory elements he is meant to be bringing together. This is not just an oblique way of embracing heterogeneity after all; it is trying to have things both ways.<sup>59</sup>

For Perry, this is not as negative as it may appear:

'Coleridge keeps hold, so to speak, of both handles,' as Wellek notices with irritation, but which I notice to appreciate: 'the unity and the things unified, the whole and the parts.' [...] To compare small things with great, my attitude towards Wellek on Coleridge is like Lewis's towards Leavis on Milton: 'He sees and hates the very same I see and love.'<sup>60</sup>

Perry's analysis plausibly accounts for Coleridge's philosophical inconsistencies.

Having looked at Coleridge's empiricism I would now like to look at his poetry in terms of its empirical elements. Everest observes that there is a continuation of the empiricism of nature poetry evident in Coleridge's verse:

We can turn back again to the preceding tradition of English nature poetry to place Coleridge's poetry as continuous with its past; for his achievement in the conversation poems gathers part of its impetus from the emerging direction of English nature poetry.<sup>61</sup>

Everest sees the conversation poems as articulating 'a certain form of consciousness' that evolved out of the "retirement tradition" present in late seventeenth-century verse.<sup>62</sup> Coleridge merely appropriated forms and conventions and then adapted them to his own poetic language.<sup>63</sup> This is evident in the conversation poems that are replete with 'the values he found in nature'.<sup>64</sup> Everest notes that a feature common to all the conversation poems is, 'their constant readiness to marry a high pitch of feeling in response to nature, with an impulse to explain or account for the experience, or to articulate it in terms that appear philosophical.'<sup>65</sup>

In addition, he notes that Coleridge is, 'at his best when he can test and measure the developing and always relative judgments of consciousness against its relationship with nature'.<sup>66</sup> Everest then points out the typical features of the conversation poems. These are their: 'private mode of address, the opposition of town and country, their heightening response to nature that culminates in philosophical generalisation'.<sup>67</sup> He emphasizes that these are also present in English poetry after the Civil War.<sup>68</sup>

House similarly acknowledges Coleridge's debt to the past, especially to Cowper:

In the conversation poems Coleridge is carrying on where Cowper left off. The autobiographical element is given a deeper psychological analysis and the thought about it carries into what is properly metaphysical poetry [...] everything has greater import; the imagery leaves Cowper's direct statement; the descriptive passages are more intricately and closely knit to their psychological affects; the description is more minute.<sup>69</sup>

James McKusick includes Bowles along with Cowper as contributing to Coleridge's "realism" where he (McKusick) cites the following from *Biographia Literaria*: 'Bowles and Cowper were, to the best of my knowledge, the first who combined natural thoughts with natural diction'.<sup>70</sup> In addition, he notes Coleridge as saying with regard to the poetry of Pope that it was written in 'language the most fantastic and arbitrary',<sup>71</sup> and that,

All of Coleridge's subsequent career, according to the account given in the *Biographia*, was conditioned by his initial preference for the "natural" language of Bowles over the "arbitrary" language of Pope.<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, concerning Coleridge's expressed disapproval (in a 1796 article for the *Watchman*) of the linguistic inventiveness of a passage in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, when compared to the writing style of Thomas Beddoes in *The History of Isaac Jenkins*, McKusick states: 'Coleridge has no use for the artificial sensibility of a writer like Sterne; only the unstudied descriptive style of a writer like Beddoes or Bowles meets his approval'.<sup>73</sup> In the same article Coleridge contends that the perfect poetic style is that 'in which we think always of the *matter*, never the *manner*'.<sup>74</sup> In other words, he advocates content over form.

The influence of nature poetry could have been the result of an attempt by Coleridge to correct what he considered as stylistic faults in his own early poetry. One of these "faults" was the frequent use of personification that is in evidence in his poetry from 1786 to 1796. The following are some of the poems written during this period along with the personifications they contain:

- 'Genevieve' (1786)—Beauty.
- 'Dura Navis' (1787)—Fancy, Sorrow, Bliss, Terror, Wave, Vengeance.
- 'Sonnet to the Autumnal Moon' (1788)—Splendour, Night, Hope, Despair.
- 'Life' (1789)—Death.
- 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton' (1790)—Fame, Neglect, Rage, Woe, Liberty, Bliss.
- 'Sonnet on quitting School for College' (1791)—Fancy, Joy, Hope.
- 'On seeing a Youth affectionately welcomed by his Sister' (1792)—Death, Knowledge, Wit.
- 'Lines on an Autumnal Evening' (1793)—Fancy, Hope, Learning, Love, Peace, Quiet.
- 'The Sigh' (1794)—Hope.
- 'Lines Written at Shurton Bars' (1795)—Mirth, Fancy, Dread, Evening.
- 'To a Young Friend' (1796)—Pensiveness, Knowledge, Inspiration.

Richard Holmes observes that during this period,

there was a long struggle between the ‘florid diction’ and epigrammatic polish and personifications of many of his longer and more formal Odes, Effusions and Monodies; and the Bowles-like plain style, expressing emotion in run-on lines, musical alliteration, and bold monosyllabic statements of personal feeling.<sup>75</sup>

Holmes sees the Bowles-like plain style represented in those poems written between 1789 and 1794 as a ‘profound attack on eighteenth-century conventions’.<sup>76</sup> Of such poems, he cites ‘Sonnet to the Autumnal Moon’ and ‘Sonnet on quitting School for College’ as examples. While he is correct in noting that these poems primarily deal with Coleridge’s personal response to the universality of change and loss, thereby distinguishing them from the more impersonal aspects of eighteenth-century verse, it seems an overstatement to label them as constituting a ‘profound attack’ on those conventions. Thematic considerations aside, ‘Sonnet to the Autumnal Moon’ is almost weighed down with eighteenth-century hyperbole and personification such as: ‘Mild Splendour of the various-vested Night!’ and ‘Ah such is Hope! as changeful and as fair!’ Hardly anything better can be said for ‘Sonnet on quitting School for College’ with its: ‘FAREWELL parental scenes! A sad farewell!’ and ‘Adieu, adieu! Ye much-loved cloisters pale!’. After 1796, Coleridge used few, if any, personifications.

An additional “fault” was his lush poetic diction, which, during this period, is noticeably lacking in descriptive terms, as can be seen in ‘To the Evening Star’:

O first and fairest of the starry Choir,  
O loveliest ‘mid the daughters of the night,  
Must not the mind I love like thee inspire  
*Pure joy and calm Delight?*<sup>77</sup>

(5-8)

The presence of these non-realistic and artificial devices, among others, is referred to in *Biographia Literaria* where he tells us that his first volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects* (published in 1796), was criticised for its ‘obscurity, a general turgidness of diction, and a profusion of new coined double epithets’.<sup>78</sup> These aspects were criticised because they represented aesthetic values opposite to those favoured by the arbiters of poetic taste of the day. This aesthetic, as I have demonstrated, called for poetic language to be treated as transparent. Consequently, any attempted innovation such as the use of “new coined” double epithets or, for that matter, a turgid and obscure lexis, was bound to cause consternation. Because of such criticism, Coleridge was forced radically to modify his poetic approach: ‘In the after editions, I pruned the double epithets with no sparing hand, and used my best efforts to tame the swell and glitter both of thought and diction’.<sup>79</sup> That his first volume of poems was published in 1796 and that his poetry from 1797 onwards contains none of the perceived faults I have mentioned, indicates that it was this critical reaction that was responsible for the sea change in his poetic style after 1796. If it were not for this transformation in Coleridge’s poetry, he would have had little connection with nature poetry. Consequently, the modifications Coleridge made because of these criticisms brought him firmly into line with the predominant empiricist aesthetic of the period. This resulted in his poetry being not such a marked departure from that which preceded it after all.



He extended this criticism to his advice to friends who offered him samples of their own poetry for his comment. For instance, when giving Robert Southey advice on a sonnet Southey had written, Coleridge suggests that the phrase ‘wild wind’ should be changed to: ‘That rustle to the sad wind moaning by’ because “wild wind” is not a true description of ‘the Autumnal Breeze that makes the trees rustle mournfully’. ‘Wild wind’, Coleridge argues, ‘applies to a storm’.<sup>80</sup> This newly found confidence in his poetic judgement is even brought into play when, upon receiving a batch of poetic works he requested—including poems by Bowles and Shakespeare—Coleridge comments favourably on Bowles’s poems saying they are ‘descriptive, tender, sublime’ adding that the Shakespeare is ‘sadly unequal to the rest’—presumably because Shakespeare’s descriptive powers are wanting.<sup>81</sup>

Coleridge’s empiricism, as worked out in his poetry and critical thought, is expressed well by William Empson when he states that for Coleridge poetry had to be, ‘illustrated by a direct and urgent experience of the author’.<sup>82</sup> The formal aspects of the poem were to be similarly transparent leading to a prose-like register:

In my defence of the lines [of a poem] running into each other, instead of closing at the couplet, and of natural language, neither bookish, nor vulgar, neither redolent of the lamp, nor of the Kennel, such as *I will remember thee*; instead of the same thought tricked up in the rag-fair finery of ‘Thy image on her wing / Before my Fancy’s eye shall MEMORY bring’.<sup>83</sup>

The phrase: ‘I will remember thee’ allows for a closure of meaning that is well suited to the imperative inherent in prose communication for transparency, whereas: ‘Thy image on her wing / Before my Fancy’s eye shall MEMORY bring’ inhibits hermeneutic closure and is therefore incompatible with prose communication. Such was Coleridge’s desire for clear and precise communication that he argued for a direct causal connection between thought and language. In response to John Thelwall’s criticism that ‘Sonnet, Composed on a journey homeward; the author having received intelligence of the birth of a Son’ was obscure, he explains:

My first *Sonnet is obscure*; but you ought to distinguish between obscurity residing in the uncommonness of the thought, and that which proceeds from *thoughts unconnected & language not adapted to the experience of them*. When you *do* find out the meaning of my poetry, can you (in general, I mean) alter the language so as to make it more perspicacious—the thought remaining the same?<sup>84</sup>

Here language is offered as a tool to mimic thought. It cannot be independent of thought. The lexis must follow the thought. However, language is slippery despite the best attempts by a writer to accomplish concision to limit meaning. The following lines are from Coleridge’s unfinished poem ‘The Destiny of Nations’:

When love rose glittering, and his gorgeous wings  
Over the abyss fluttered with such glad noise,  
As what time after long and pestful claims,  
With slimy shapes and miscreated life  
Poisoning the vast Pacific, the fresh breeze  
Wakens the merchant-sail uprising<sup>85</sup>

We can infer from what Coleridge says of them that he, too, would not altogether disagree: ‘These are very

fine lines, tho' I say it [...]. But hang me, if I know or ever did know the meaning of them, tho' my own composition'.<sup>86</sup> Holmes's says of this statement: 'For the first time he is suggesting that poetry may be written from somewhere outside conscious control'.<sup>87</sup> In terms of Coleridge's poetic ideals, this would indicate something of a failure. Nevertheless, this is not a rare occurrence for him: 'As to my own poetry I do confess that it frequently both in thought & language deviates from "nature & simplicity"'.<sup>88</sup> From this it would seem that Coleridge's poetic ideas have some sort of quantifiable criteria to inform them. However, as this brief discussion indicates, this is not so. Sometimes he is for clarity of expression, at others he is not. Holmes offers a possible reason for this confusion that sits well with the one Perry suggested above. Holmes suggests that Coleridge held the concept of 'power in poetry arising from a combination of clarity and obscurity'.<sup>89</sup> In addition, he quotes the following entry from Coleridge's Notebook kept when he was studying in Germany:

The elder Languages fitter for Poetry because they expressed only prominent ideas with clearness, others but darkly ... i.e. Feelings created by obscure ideas associate themselves with the one *clear* idea. When no criticism is pretended to, & the Mind in its simplicity gives itself up to a Poem as to a work of nature, Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally & not perfectly understood.<sup>90</sup>

Commenting on this Holmes concludes:

Coleridge was here reaching towards a complex idea of poetry that was more than mere youthful "intoxication"; it had to be both intelligible and mysterious, the proper subject of a critical, adult mind playing over it in detail.<sup>91</sup>

Being 'intelligible and mysterious' was also something Coleridge emphasised to Thelwell when discussing the ability of philosophical mysticism to produce intelligent poetry.<sup>92</sup> However, in practice Coleridge's poetry for the most part demonstrates clarity over ambiguity.

When we look at Coleridge's ideas concerning "philosophical language" and its importance to poetic composition, we can see this desire for clarity further illustrated. Wylie suggests that Coleridge's interest in the relationship of nature and language may have its origin in Hartley's theory of the origins of language.<sup>93</sup> Hartley thought that since speech was a necessary requirement for Adam and Eve to name the animals in Eden, God granted it them and from it language developed.<sup>94</sup> Initially, this language was monosyllabic and its usage was limited to referring to 'visible Things'.<sup>95</sup> After the Fall, Hartley supposes that Adam and Eve 'extended their Language to new Objects and Ideas' and principally to those associated with pain.<sup>96</sup> For this the invention of new words was required.<sup>97</sup> Eventually, this language became corrupted as humans, according to Hartley, acquired names for evil things, which led to a greater propagation of self-interest. In response to this, God disrupted the construction of the Tower of Babel and in doing caused the confusion of tongues in order to halt the progress of further corruption to this language and thereby preventing its dominance over mankind by it being the cause of false perceptions.<sup>98</sup>

These false perceptions were the result of the corrupted language having acquired the means to become ambiguous—a major departure from Adam's original language, which was unequivocal.<sup>99</sup> By the eighteenth century, the expansion of knowledge had resulted, as Hartley saw it, in humanity having moved closer to an original state of pure knowledge. This being the case, it was necessary to go back to the original language of Adam, integrating the languages of the world in the process, to reinstate the purity of the original language.<sup>100</sup> This language would be a "philosophical one" 'without any Deficiency, Superfluity, or

Equivocation'.<sup>101</sup> McKusick notes that this "Adamic" language is analogous to Plato's idea that an object's name represents the object's essence.<sup>102</sup> The idea that objects had essences was familiar to Coleridge from his reading of Plato's *Cratylus*. The dialogue between Hermogenes and Cratylus demonstrates the tension between words being envisioned as expressing the 'inner nature of the things they designate' and their being merely arbitrary signs.<sup>103</sup> In this dialogue the character of Cratylus,

represents the extreme naturalist position, according to which all names bear an intimate, though perhaps mystically obscure, connection with the things they designate.<sup>104</sup>

Coleridge would most probably have agreed with this position.

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- <sup>1</sup> Herbert Read, 'Coleridge as Critic', in Coburn, *Coleridge*, pp.94-111 (p.96).
- <sup>2</sup> See Cristina Flores Moreno, 'The Symbolic Poetic Act in S.T. Coleridge's "Conversation Poems": An Introduction to the Sources of Coleridge's Neoplatonic Poetics', *Cuadernos de investigación filológica*, 27-28, (2001-2002), 31-42
- <sup>3</sup> Ian Wylie, *Young Coleridge and the Philosophers of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.5.
- <sup>4</sup> Wylie, pp.8-9.
- <sup>5</sup> Wylie, p.9. Rookmaaker notes: 'The Hartleyan elements in 'The Eolian Harp' suggest that the notion of passivity tends to occur in the philosophical climate of empiricism'. See *Towards a Romantic Conception of Nature: Coleridge's Poetry Up to 1803*, pp.40-41.
- <sup>6</sup> Kelvin Everest, *Coleridge's Secret Ministry: The Context of the Conversation Poems, 1795-1798* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), p.32.
- <sup>7</sup> Everest, pp.32-33.
- <sup>8</sup> Everest, p.33.
- <sup>9</sup> Everest, p.33.
- <sup>10</sup> Read, Coburn, *Coleridge*, p.96.
- <sup>11</sup> Norman Fruman, *The Damaged Archangel* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), p.82.
- <sup>12</sup> H. R. Rookmaaker, *Towards a Romantic Conception of Nature: Coleridge's Poetry Up to 1803* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984), p.105.
- <sup>13</sup> Dorothy M. Emmet, 'Coleridge on the Growth of the Mind', in Coburn, *Coleridge*, pp.161-78 (p.163).
- <sup>14</sup> *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by J. D. Campbell (London: Macmillan, 1938), p.60.
- <sup>15</sup> Emmet, Coburn, *Coleridge*, p.163.
- <sup>16</sup> Emmet, Coburn, *Coleridge*, pp.163-4.
- <sup>17</sup> Emmet, Coburn, *Coleridge*, p.164.
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in Emmet, Coburn, *Coleridge*, p.164.
- <sup>19</sup> Emmet, Coburn, *Coleridge*, p.164.
- <sup>20</sup> Because of this assumption, it is similarly assumed that Coleridge's influence upon Wordsworth necessarily must be of a Kantian nature.
- <sup>21</sup> Trevor H. Levere, *Poetry Revealed in Nature: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Early Nineteenth-Century Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 3.
- <sup>22</sup> Humphrey House, *Coleridge: The Clark Lectures 1951-52* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), p.14.
- <sup>23</sup> House, p.26.
- <sup>24</sup> House, p.26
- <sup>25</sup> Quoted in House, p.123.
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted in House, p.123.
- <sup>27</sup> Quoted in House, p.123.
- <sup>28</sup> *Poetical Works*, ed. Campbell, p.116.
- <sup>29</sup> House, p.124.
- <sup>30</sup> House, p.14.
- <sup>31</sup> House, p.48.
- <sup>32</sup> House, p.47.
- <sup>33</sup> Levere, p.9.
- <sup>34</sup> Levere, p.13.

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- <sup>35</sup> Levere, p.2.
- <sup>36</sup> Levere, p.2.
- <sup>37</sup> Alan Richardson, 'Coleridge and the Dream of an Embodied Mind', *Romanticism*, 5.1, (1999), 1-25 (p.1).
- <sup>38</sup> Richardson, p.8.
- <sup>39</sup> Quoted in Richardson, p.15.
- <sup>40</sup> Albert Gérard, 'The Systolic Rhythm: The Structure of Coleridge's Conversation Poems', in Coburn, *Coleridge*, pp.78-87 (p.84).
- <sup>41</sup> Gérard, Coburn, *Coleridge*, p.85.
- <sup>42</sup> *Poetical Works*, ed. Campbell, p.92.
- <sup>43</sup> *Poetical Works*, ed. Campbell, pp.92-93.
- <sup>44</sup> *Poetical Works*, ed. Campbell, p.93.
- <sup>45</sup> *Collected Letters of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. by E. L. Griggs, 6 Vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956-71), I, p.210.
- <sup>46</sup> *Letters*, ed. Griggs, I, p.397.
- <sup>47</sup> House, p.47.
- <sup>48</sup> *Letters*, ed. Griggs, I, p.354.
- <sup>49</sup> Richardson, p.3.
- <sup>50</sup> Richardson, p.3.
- <sup>51</sup> J. A. Appleyard, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature: The Development of a Concept of Poetry 1791-1819* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p.5.
- <sup>52</sup> Appleyard, p.5.
- <sup>53</sup> Appleyard, p. 5.
- <sup>54</sup> Appleyard, pp.5-6.
- <sup>55</sup> Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p.7.
- <sup>56</sup> Perry, p.12.
- <sup>57</sup> Perry, p.13.
- <sup>58</sup> Perry, p.19.
- <sup>59</sup> Perry, p.22.
- <sup>60</sup> Perry, p.22.
- <sup>61</sup> Everest, p.159.
- <sup>62</sup> Everest, p. 9.
- <sup>63</sup> Everest, p.147.
- <sup>64</sup> Everest, p.147.
- <sup>65</sup> Everest, pp.164-65.
- <sup>66</sup> Everest, p.159.
- <sup>67</sup> Everest, pp.189-90.
- <sup>68</sup> Everest, p.90.
- <sup>69</sup> House, p.73.
- <sup>70</sup> James C. McKusick, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp.13-14.
- <sup>71</sup> McKusick, p.14.
- <sup>72</sup> McKusick, p.14.
- <sup>73</sup> McKusick, p.16.
- <sup>74</sup> Quoted in McKusick, p.16.
- <sup>75</sup> Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p.35.
- <sup>76</sup> Holmes, p.35.

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- <sup>77</sup> *Poetical Works*, ed. Campbell, p.11.
- <sup>78</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by J. Shawcross, 1st edn, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, repr. 1962), I, p.2.
- <sup>79</sup> Shawcross, I, p.3.
- <sup>80</sup> Letter dated 18 September 1794, *Letters*, ed. Griggs, I, pp.103-4.
- <sup>81</sup> Letter dated 22 July 1794, *Letters*, ed. Griggs, I, p. 94.
- <sup>82</sup> *Coleridge's Verse*, ed. by W. Empson and D. Pirie (London: Faber, 1972), p.13.
- <sup>83</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Shawcross, I, p.14.
- <sup>84</sup> Letter dated 17 December 1796, *Letters*, ed. Griggs, I, p.277.
- <sup>85</sup> Quoted in Holmes, p.141.
- <sup>86</sup> Quoted in Holmes, p.141.
- <sup>87</sup> Holmes, p.141.
- <sup>88</sup> Letter dated 17 December 1796, *Letters*, ed. Griggs, I, p.278.
- <sup>89</sup> Holmes, p.217.
- <sup>90</sup> Quoted in Holmes, p.217.
- <sup>91</sup> Quoted in Holmes, p.218.
- <sup>92</sup> Holmes, p.131.
- <sup>93</sup> Wylie, p.84.
- <sup>94</sup> Wylie, p.84.
- <sup>95</sup> David Hartley, *Observations of Man: His Frame, His Duty, His Expectations*, 2 vols (New York: Delmar, 1976), I, p.298.
- <sup>96</sup> Hartley, I, p.298.
- <sup>97</sup> Hartley, I, p.298.
- <sup>98</sup> Wylie, p.84.
- <sup>99</sup> Wylie, p.84.
- <sup>100</sup> Wylie, p.84.
- <sup>101</sup> Hartley, I, p.315.
- <sup>102</sup> McKusick, pp.8-9.
- <sup>103</sup> McKusick, p.4.
- <sup>104</sup> McKusick, p.5.