Introduction
Coleridge's philosophy of poetic form

> The sense of how much operated for him outside of poetic limits –
> but haunted him there. And he left it at that.
>
> (Laura (Riding) Jackson, 'On Coleridge')[1]

In any discussion of the philosophy of poetic form, Samuel Taylor Coleridge presents himself at once as the most likely, and the least likely, of candidates.

The most likely, because Coleridge famously engaged both the British and European philosophical traditions more extensively than any other Romantic author – arguably, more than any single figure in the whole of English literature. While the merit or originality of that engagement has been questioned so persistently that any Coleridge scholar cannot but approach the issue with a shudder of dread, its existence is, at the very least, generally conceded.

And yet, Coleridge remains – paradoxically enough, for somebody who once attempted a 'transcendental deduction' of the imagination – in certain respects the figure least amenable to such a discussion. Such, in any case, is the implicit suggestion of the vast majority of recent scholarly work consecrated to him, which betrays a consistent reluctance to consider concurrently those two elements – philosophy and poetry – whose mutual implication Coleridge, of all writers, would seem so obviously to suggest.

There are various reasons for this counter-intuitive oversight, many of them eminently practical. Most obviously, the remarkable burst of publication triggered by Kathleen Coburn's five-volume edition of the *Notebooks* (*CN*) (1957–2002) has decisively influenced the drift of Coleridge studies. The Bollingen Series *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1962–2002) has provided by far the most extensive survey of his impossibly various interests. While the final title of that series offers expanded and variorum versions of Coleridge's verse, (Volume XVI, 2001),[2] academic interest has understandably focussed upon the previously unpublished or

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inaccessible manuscript versions of prose writing, which includes the *Logic* (vol. XIII) and *Opus Maximum* (vol. XV).

Much of the best scholarship over the past four decades has involved a critical recasting of Coleridge's work in the light of these newly available materials. Paul Hamilton, most notably with *Coleridge's Poetics* (1983), has cumulatively provided the most comprehensive account yet of Coleridge's engagement with the German philosophical tradition.[3] James C. McKusick's *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language* (1986) uses a wide range of materials, including the *Logic*, to indicate a comparable philological endeavour.[4] Seamus Perry's more recent *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (1999) approaches head-on the difficulty of marshalling this unwieldy array of materials, claiming persuasively that the significance of Coleridge's work lies not in any final triumphant synthesis, but in a series of constitutive, productive 'muddles'.[5]

On the whole, however, these representative works (along with many other titles treating Coleridge directly or in passing) manifest a striking disinclination to engage in any sustained way with the specifically formal, sensuous or conventional elements of Coleridge's verse.[6] This omission is all the more surprising for the fact that those critics so often claim to be treating – precisely – poetry. In the case of Hamilton's most influential work (whose title is, after all, *Coleridge's Poetics*), a chapter entitled 'The Necessity of Poetry' addresses metre, diction and the larger concept of 'The Philosophical Poem', without once making reference to any of Coleridge's verse.[7] Indeed, this remarkable work, the most syncretic account of Coleridge's thinking we possess, nonetheless does not make specific reference to a single line of poetry.

These observations, it is imperative to stress, in no way undermine the contribution of Hamilton, who is very clear regarding his own concentration on 'the theory and practice of criticism'.[8] But surely, in any direct consideration of Coleridge's 'poetics', that poetry should itself be able to argue its own necessity, rather than waiting for a removed tribunal to pass sentence, or pronounce that it can finally begin? Of course, Coleridge's reflections on verse are not illegitimate for being conducted in prose, nor do they require submission to the reality-testing of poetic 'practice' for justification. But so too might verse itself explore its expressive and cognitive possibilities, in a manner that we might reasonably expect to arrive at different conclusions to those of prose.

Broader critical trends equally contribute to the current neglect of Coleridge's verse. Following the earlier pioneering work of Robert Penn Warren and others, any contemporary critic would be justified in

wondering what could possibly remain to be said about an output that is comparatively small; all the more so, given the yet smaller portion of that verse generally considered canonical (most of which stems from the *annus mirabilis* of 1798–9). The subsequent radical shift from Warren's generation to an increasingly professionalised and self-consciously theoretical critical industry would, moreover, impinge upon Coleridge's reputation in specific ways.

For the rediscovery of linguistic reference that characterised so much criticism of the 1970s and 1980s had the curious, if not entirely unforeseeable, consequence of making much of Coleridge's own supposed conceptions of literature at best suspicious, at worst taboo. Jerome Christensen's *Coleridge's Blessed Machine of Language* (another reading that focuses primarily upon the prose work) remains exceptional in attempting anything like a deconstructive reading of Coleridge's writings.[9] The pre-eminence of Paul de Man's essay 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', offers the most convincing explanation for such a state of affairs, so stoutly did it attack Coleridge's naïve faith in the doctrines of 'organic form', 'unity', 'the symbol', and assorted other cognates.[10] It is surely not coincidental that subsequent decades were marked by a shift away from Coleridge's verse towards those poets (Shelley, Hölderlin and Wordsworth being de Man's preferred examples) who allegedly better understood our disfigured linguistic condition.

It has become hard, then, to pronounce terms such as 'organic form' and 'unity' without the scare-quotes that I here employ, so strongly do they radiate what now goes by the name of Romantic Ideology. This automatic connection is hardly surprising, for Jerome McGann makes Coleridge's formulations essential to his *Romantic Ideology*, in the process extending what for deconstructive critics was a primarily philosophical problem (the totalising impulse) into the political dimension. 'The ideal of Harmony or "Unity of Being" – as it appears in the work of Coleridge . . . becomes a philosophical goal of most Romantic theorists, all of whom have been marked by that sign of Cain, a passion for systematic knowledge (and generally, as with Coleridge and the German post-Kantians, for speculative systematic knowledge).'[11] One of the effects of such a reading has been to give rise to a form of perpetual critical vigilance, which, often displaying far less suppleness than McGann himself, regards the very contemplation of the artwork (leaving aside what conclusions are drawn) as ideologically contaminated from the start.

However many further reasons might be appended, it remains the case that Coleridge criticism today sees very little of the sort of fruitful enquiry into the relationship between verse form and philosophical thought that

now characterises, say, Wordsworth scholarship.[12] As the reader will already have intuited, I do not feel that Coleridge's verse is comparatively so minimal (in significance or extent) that nothing remains to be said about it. Nor do I believe that the range of this verse has been fully covered by the established scholarship of Warren, Abrams or Bloom; or that the more recent publication of Coleridge's wider output in itself resolves the many issues that it raises. The argument that follows is therefore also, in its most elementary form, a plea to continue, or to start, or to start once again, to read Coleridge's verse.

In such matters, it pays to be as clear as possible from the outset. This work is nowhere intended as a wilful 'return' to a prior form of reading that sought to focus on the artwork as a complex, self-sufficient entity, and which (both in Richards's 'practical' version of criticism, or the 'New' type of Warren and others) followed Coleridge as a guiding light. Any such return would be as impracticable as it would be misguided. On the contrary, I hold that the more recent scholarship set in train by Kathleen Coburn (without whose endeavours this current project would be patently impossible) calls precisely and strongly for a fundamental re-evaluation of the nature and limits of Coleridge's verse. Such a re-evaluation cuts both ways: the more nuanced account of Coleridge's philosophy that we now possess enables us to re-examine many presuppositions that apply to his poetry; but also, and just as pertinently, the extent to which that poetry shared or anticipated his philosophical concerns.

But Coleridge's verse did more than share or anticipate: it often represented his sole means of thinking in a philosophically significant and original manner, however little Coleridge himself would have liked to entertain such an idea. It did so, I contend, precisely through *not* being philosophy as we traditionally conceive it, as discursive tract or propositional statement. Rather, Coleridge's verse thought philosophically through its expressive repertoire, through the sum of its historical conventions, and through the nature of its sensuous embodiment.

None of these properties are particularly occult. By expressive repertoire, I mean evident components of verse technique such as metre, rhythm, rhyme and stanza structure; and the many subtler effects that flow from them, which include caesurae, catalexis and stress-inversion, to name but a few. We are accustomed to calling such devices 'formal', although this term brings with some of the obvious objections that arrive with 'organic unity', and deflects attention from the manner in which such expressive features are constituted. McGann's historicism is extremely welcome insofar as it focusses attention on the extent to which not only ideas are

ideological; verse form, too, contains a complex history of allegiance and contestation.

In speaking of the sum of historical conventions, then, I do not mean a series of established signatures to which one would simply co-sign, or a set of outfits that one would pluck, ready-made, from the shelf. However much recognised modes such as the sonnet, the ballad, the heroic couplet might seem established, their historical elaboration is in reality more contingent and various. It is not only wilful contestation (Alexander Pope's 'mock' epic, Emily Dickinson's 'broken' ballad) that shifts the possibilities of a given mode; so, too, attempted emulations (Shelley's terza rima) often reveal unforeseen expressive resources, for all the emulator's best intentions.

What I lastly call the sensuous embodiment of verse encompasses and extends both of the above points. By it I imply our tendency to enact a piece of verse writing in a different manner to, say, a philosophical treatise or prose essay. We cannot approach poetry, that is to say, without some consideration of how we are to sound it, even if that sounding – as is increasingly the case – is 'silent' rather than recited. However detailed our inventory of formal devices might be, metrical accent and generic convention will finally prove insufficient for the full range of potential performances. All of these potential performances develop a certain experience of temporality, through the unfolding line, and a certain affective state, through the emotional tone or pitch in which we deliver it. The sensuous and affective embodiment of verse is itself philosophically significant; but no less is it again historically constituted, through the successive communities of readers that include our contemporary selves.

As I say, none of the three properties outlined above is particularly occult. Each suggests readily observable ways in which verse might produce significance in a manner distinct from (or in tension with) the semantic or discursive elements of language. The task of this book is accordingly not to show *that* such a fact might exist, but *how* it exists in the specific case of Coleridge. To this end, each of the subsequent four chapters offers a cumulative instance of where his verse thinks philosophically in a manner that philosophy proper cannot (or could not for Coleridge). These instances show, that is to say, not only that verse is capable of being auto-critical or self-aware, as Michael O'Neill has persuasively argued in *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*.[13] The critical component of poetic form is capable of reflecting beyond the question of its own composition, and upon a variety of legitimately philosophical concerns.

Chapter 1, 'Interruption in the conversation poem sequence', departs from a representative moment in which verse transverses philosophy.

Coleridge is delivering a lecture that purports to be on German ideal-ism, when he pauses to recall 'The Eolian Harp', a poem published more than two decades earlier. I contend that this moment forms a counterpart to the several, significant ways in which Coleridge's conversation poem sequence itself interrupts philosophy. I interpret this interruption at once as formal device, in Coleridge's singular manipulation of the hemistich, or 'broken' verse line; as compositional process, in the numerous revisions that Coleridge continues to make to the sequence throughout his career; and as a dialogic process, in the way in which voice finds itself (or permits itself to be) interrupted by another.

The evocation of a thinking mind or speaking voice that suffers interrup-tion proves philosophically significant in the context of Coleridge's wider thought. For Coleridge's ongoing revision of the conversation sequence both reflects his growing subscription to German idealism and anticipates his subsequent dissent from the 'egotism' that he comes to identify with Berkeley and Schelling.[14] A world where the constitutive mind is the means and measure of all things comes to feel like a poor kind of world. The poems that comprise the conversation sequence dramatise an increasingly marked interruptive crisis, in which the mind gives over its attempt to constitute reality so as to recover a sense of the world's actuality. In so doing, I contend, the sequence reveals an irreducible materiality that Coleridge is thought to have exhausted in his Associationist youth, but which never truly went away. The conversation poem advances this notion not through philo-sophical statement, however, but through a common formal repertoire, which extends beyond interruption to include the slippage between imper-ative and apostrophe, the emphatic use of conjunction and the ghost of rhyme.

Coleridge's conversation poem sequence, then, demonstrates the way in which individual poems might work in philosophically significant ways. But what permits verse in general to perform such a function? Chapter 2, 'Rhythm and affect in "Christabel"', essays an answer, arguing that Coleridge's verse and late philosophical writings understand affective form in shared yet distinct ways. I argue that what Coleridge saw as the essential novelty of 'Christabel' – its direct coupling of syllabic variation with 'the *sense* and *passion*' – was more radically true than he intuited. Far from merely depending upon or corresponding to a preformed affect that would simply be waiting for realisation, the poem's prosodic organisation is inherently, constitutively affective. While Coleridge took the beats of each line to be invariable, 'Christabel' contains several positively irresolvable voicing dilemmas, each of which generate their own shade of passion.

By stressing the various possible vocalisations of a line, I choose to emphasise rhythm, rather than the metre that Coleridge's Preface foregrounds. Such dilemmas would hold unsuspected consequences for his late philosophic writing. In a critically untouched late essay, 'On the Passions' (1828), Coleridge attempts to rewrite the Cartesian account of feeling, so as to show that the diversification of organic life both exists and proceeds through affect. Coleridge's essay sets itself the task of finally accounting for the distinctively human passions. Yet just as 'Christabel' demonstrates a world that is more extensively and diversely affective than Coleridge's Preface suggests, so 'On the Passions' develops a notion of feeling, embodied form so pervasive that is difficult to see how the human is qualitatively distinct. How can we be sure that a poem communicates the particular tenor of feeling that we envisage; or distinguish the specifically human passions from the various animal cries and screeches that echo throughout 'Christabel'?

Chapter 3, '"Limbo" and the philosophy of the pun', arises from these unsettling queries. 'Christabel' demonstrated the extent to which poetic form could itself generate a form of feeling that was unforeseen or unintended. But Coleridge did elsewhere attempt to account directly for the capriciousness of language, through his theorisation of that seemingly most arbitrary of linguistic devices: the pun. Although he never composed his much-promised philosophical 'Defence of Punning', Coleridge's scattered speculations on the device attempt to identify not an uncomplicatedly witty or urbane practice, but rather precisely what the metrico-rhythmical organisation of 'Christabel' embodied – 'passion'.

I trace this attempted legitimation of the pun to a number of related concerns. Coleridge continues the rather embarrassed efforts of biblical critics to explicate the copious wordplay found in Scripture – a historical instance that challenges the poststructuralist adoption of paronomasia as a generalised trope of linguistic indeterminacy. But his deepest engagement again emerges most decisively through verse. Having linked the pun to allegory, Coleridge composes a series of curious poems in that latter mode, which transfigure Miltonic and Spenserian precedent. Elsewhere, his sustained interest in Donne's *Satyres* demonstrates the capacity of the witty couplet to realise what he calls, in a familiar formulation, 'the sense & Passion'. Such concerns fuse in 'Limbo' (1811), the most significant of Coleridge's late verse compositions. My tracing of the poem's complex compositional history reveals an attempt to retrieve human particularity, in the face of linguistic indeterminacy, and through the medium of verse form.

Where Chapter 3 shows Coleridge's endeavour to recuperate the divisive elements of language, my concluding chapter, 'The scandal of tautology' treats his notions of coincidence. Formulations of self-identity (of which Coleridge's 'symbol' proves one prominent instance) continually threaten to devolve into mere tautology. Yet far from fearing such a reduction, Coleridge himself consistently theorised this apparently most unpropitious of devices, in such a way as to reveal a surprisingly varied historical practice. At the end of the eighteenth century, I argue, tautology developed an unprecedented significance, both for philosophy and for verse, from Kant to Wordsworth.

While considerations of his symbol normally stress its integrative or natural properties, I concentrate upon Coleridge's curious designation of it as a categorical or productive tautology – as a 'tautegory'. The attempt to conceive of a non-reductive self-identity, I demonstrate, increasingly leads Coleridge to Hebrew, as a language that enables (in such grammatical devices as the absolute, or 'tautological' infinitive) a differing relation to ipseity. While he would make several attempts to realise the 'sublime' tautology of Scripture, Coleridge's most significant engagement with the device arrives with the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. That poem dramatises a world that is barrenly analytic, or terrifyingly self-identical. Yet its rhyme, serial repetition and manipulation of ballad form finally transfigure the logically selfsame into the qualitatively, experientially distinct. In so doing, poetic form engages philosophy for a final time.

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These chapters, taken individually and as a whole, therefore consistently emphasise the particularity of Coleridge's verse. Yet they also indicate a number of potential revisions to his philosophical thought considered as such. (Just because we cannot fully extricate that philosophy from his verse, does not mean that having considered the two concurrently we cannot then speak of his philosophy as a singular entity.) I intend several such revisions: most immediately, I aim to highlight thinkers whose influence upon Coleridge has hitherto been overlooked. These include the unorthodox Cartesian Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), whose occasionalism helps us to understand the divergence from idealism that I chart in Chapter 1; and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), who pursues many of the questions regarding sacred paronomasia that I will trace in Chapter 3.[15]

These diverse arguments and proper names all work to unsettle the intellectual chronology that remains standard in considerations of Coleridge: a chronology that runs from a precocious Associationism inspired by Hartley

and Godwin, to an increasingly absolute, 'German' idealism, to the late Highgate years of hermetic idiosyncrasy. Such a tidy summary impinges no less upon Coleridge's verse, which is commonly taken to belong only to that first phase of youthful exuberance, before being definitively dampened. This book, by contrast, asserts the significance of Coleridge's post-1800 poetic output, despite his own protestations of creative sterility. It does so not only by focussing on later compositions such as 'Limbo', but also on the consistently sensitive revision of existing material. Even Coleridge's concluding, fragmentary *Theory of Life* demonstrates the extent to which his philosophy continued to assimilate the earlier concerns of his verse.

This hardly implies a systematic continuity of thought. I am fully in Seamus Perry's camp, as regards the muddlesomeness of Coleridge's writing. Coleridge did not only philosophise most ably through verse because he happened to be a virtuoso poet. It was also because, due to a motley array of temperamental and contingent factors, he was unable to present some of his most striking insights in anything like the form of philosophy proper. Very often verse's significant yield emerged in the face of Coleridge's stated philosophical convictions; very often it emerged in the face of what Coleridge took to be the meaning, significance or novelty of that verse itself. Coleridge's poetry may then not have been 'philosophic' in the sense that he reserved for Wordsworth's *Recluse*, which was famously to have 'refuted the sandy Sophisms of Locke, and the Mechanic Dogmatists'.[16] I hope to show that it was altogether more interesting than that.

It is better to attempt to anticipate a number of potential objections to such an argument. Marjorie Levinson suggests several, by contending that '[f]or us to interpret English poetry by way of the German critical model is not only a historically dubious procedure, but in the absence of an English critical apparatus that might counter the German ideology, downright appropriative'.[17] Even given the extenuating circumstance of Coleridge's authentic relation to 'the German critical model', the force of this complaint would still hold. Doesn't any effort to assert the 'philosophical' significance of poetry depend upon the high-Romantic vision of the Jena School, which has long since been proven ideological both in its specific political ramifications; and in its enduring fetishisation within certain corners of the Anglophone academy?

I would parry such an attack in a number of ways. One of the stated aims of this book is in fact to challenge a certain uncritically accepted German influence upon Coleridge. But to the extent that this influence clearly must remain in place, I also wish to suggest that its borders are more permeable than Levinson suggests. More than one of my chapters suggests

a greater bilateralism than is commonly supposed: the history of 'sacred' wordplay reveals a sustained dialogue between the British and German traditions, which leads from Bishop Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753),[18] through to the biblical criticism of Herder and Michaelis, the latter of whom came to influence Coleridge during his stay in Göttingen. Similarly, Chapter 4 traces the ironic passage of Coleridge's 'tautegory' into a German tradition (represented by Schelling) from which he notoriously and liberally borrowed. The ideological overvaluation of the German tradition stems in part from a historical forgetting of where and how it inherits and transforms British materials.

To the more general charge that a sustained attention to verse form occludes the political, economic or social elements of a text's production, I reserve a different response. The following work attends to the specificity of Coleridge's verse in the conviction that it brings us closer to, not further away from, material production. This material production assumes veracious guises: my reading of 'Limbo', for instance, attempts to wrest it away from the standard editorial presentation of a single, integral poem. The poem's manuscript evidence reveals a more complex compositional history, in which the formal element (in this case, the heroic couplet) is no simple aesthetic choice, but is mediated through a range of expressive and political histories.

On a more general level, however, I believe the very separation between formal expression and material production gives a distorted view both of the artwork, and of its putative ideology. Poetic form is no less ideological than 'theme' or 'content', in the sense that its various modulations contain very many encoded political realities (the Royalist investment of the heroic couplet makes the fact transparent). But at the same time, the sheer variability of those formal modulations makes the direct or stable identification of form with ideology reductive. It is ironic that, while some of the more unforgiving forms of ideology-critique over the past decades have operated under the aegis of Theodor W. Adorno, very few have considered his destabilising claim that works of art 'give voice to what ideology hides. Their very success moves beyond false consciousness, whether intentionally or not.'[19]

My concluding coda develops such arguments, by situating my reconsideration of Coleridge's verse in the broader context of the current literary critical treatment of poetic form. That verse, I argue, offers a means of resisting the stubborn bad choice between formalist and historicist modes of reading – whose very existence Coleridge himself has often been held to sanction. In place of any triumphant synthesis of (or final preference for)