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John Worthen

Excerpt

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Chapter 1

Early life and contexts: 1772–1802

The least beloved	2
Unitarian	3
Pantisocrat and democrat	4
Journalist	7
Friend	8
Self-watcher	10
Metaphysician and Kantian	11
Opium user	13
Lover	15
Writer	16

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in the small town of Ottery St Mary in Devon in 1772, the youngest son of a Church of England clergyman who was also a grammar school headmaster. His father was a scholarly man who wrote several books, including a Latin grammar; his mother was a capable organiser determined that her children should do well in the world. By the age of three, the boy was reading on his own; early and late he took every opportunity to read and to tell others about what he had read. By the age of six, he had discovered that at Ottery Fair the old books were ‘formidable Rivals to Gilt Gingerbread’ and had read among other works a volume of the *Arabian Nights* three times (CN v. 5829, CL I. 347, *Friend* I. 148). His whole future life depended upon this early initiation into the pleasures of reading; he lost himself in books, and nothing else would ever be quite so interesting. Later in life he described the technique of speed-reading he developed when young: ‘stereotype-wise by whole pages at a glance: as if my eyes & brain had been a claud Lorrain Mirror, or a Camera Obscura’ (CM IV. 336–7).¹ He did outstandingly at school.

He later became aware, however, of how odd his childhood had been. He had been the youngest of ten and had grown up (he believed) the favourite child of his parents, but was disliked and bullied by his brother Frank, so felt ‘forced to be by myself’ (CN II. 2647). His constant reading meant that ‘I never played except by myself, and then only acting over what I had been

2 *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

reading or fancying', while he developed 'none of the Child's Habits – I never thought as a Child; never had the language of a Child' (CN v. 6675). Being 'accustomed only to the conversation of grown persons', he grew 'arrogant, & conceited'.² Looking back, he believed 'I have always been preyed on by some Dread . . . from fear of Pain, or Shame' (CN II. 2398); what drove a child like himself to religion and philosophy, he thought, was a sense of 'darkness felt in the day-light' (SWF I. 695).

In 1782, however, his father died, and his mother sent him as a boarder to Christ's Hospital school in London (orphans of the clergy were frequently sent there: but he was not an orphan). He lived the life of a city child in London, and loathed it: 'Deprest, moping, friendless' and constantly hungry (CN v. 6675). He never forgot the arbitrary punishments, Geography 'so sedulously cuffed into my Ears', for example (CN II. 2015); he never forgave his mother. He would claim in 1804 that 'I was hardly used from infancy to Boyhood; & from Boyhood to Youth, most cruelly' (CL II. 1053). He reckoned that his sleep disturbances were a consequence of his early life: 'Sleep a pandemonium of all the shames & miseries of the past Life from early childhood all huddled together, & bronzed [i.e. made unfeeling, hardened] with one stormy Light of Terror & Self-torture' (CN II. 2091). His reaction, early and late, was to withdraw into himself, 'to crumple myself up in a sunny Corner, and read, read, read . . . with eyes closed to every object of *present* sense' (CN v. 6675).

He grew up a man who, in spite of his intelligence, astonishing memory, exemplary learning and great sophistication of thought, all his life remained 'a Boy, as it were'; to his brother George he would confess how sad he was to have 'roam'd through life / Still most a Stranger' (CN III. 3322, CPI I. 327). His constant search for figures who would sympathise with him was one indication of this; another was his alarming capacity for irresponsibility and evasion.

The least beloved

He also grew up feeling that he had lacked love all his life, and much of his subsequent experience was marked by attempts to be loved, liked and accepted. By 1793 he was rather hopelessly in love with Mary Evans, the sister of a school friend (he was also going to prostitutes); in 1795 he married Sarah Fricker, unhappily; in 1801 he fell in love catastrophically with Sara Hutchinson; in 1805, in Sicily, he was almost seduced by Cecilia Bertozzi. 'To be beloved is all, I need' (CL IV. 740) was how he summed himself up, but complained in 1808 how 'never, never, have I met with any Being who . . . loved *me* better than any one' (CN III. 3442). 'No one on earth has ever LOVED me' was his anguished

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[More information](#)*Early life and contexts: 1772–1802* 3

cry in 1810; in 1817, he would reiterate miserably how ‘of all men known to me I am the least beloved’ (CN III. 4006, CL IV. 740). He deeply envied those who *were* loved – for example, his friend William Wordsworth, ‘happy in a sense undreamt of by the World’ because of his marriage to Mary Hutchinson. Coleridge believed he had experienced just the opposite: ‘so likewise do *they* most pine under the want of sympathy & [?loveliness/liveliness] and to them to be miserable in this is to be miserable in all’ (CN III. 3648).

Unitarian

At Cambridge University from 1791, his prize-winning Greek ode on the slave trade was read at Commencement in July 1792; but the following year he failed to win the Craven Scholarship, which would have ensured him a career in the University or the Church. He had however gained entry into a circle of young radical thinkers who, having originally been excited by the French Revolution of 1789, were now troubled by the increasingly repressive regime in England. In 1792 there had been a Royal Proclamation against Seditious Writings and Publications, which ensured that republican writing like Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man* would be suppressed.

It was not an accident that the group Coleridge fell in with, at Cambridge, were Unitarians; Unitarianism (the faith which affirms the unipersonality of the Godhead and denies the Trinity), like other nonconformist faiths, had a long tradition of radicalism in politics. Coleridge was (crucially) converted to Unitarianism; its religion offered yet another way for him to detach himself from his Church of England family, and – with his ability to read quickly, speak loquaciously and spend a vast amount of energy on what excited him – within a short while he had been thoroughly radicalised, to become what he later called ‘a sharer in the general vortex’ (*Friend* II. 146). It became an article of his belief that he had a natural antagonism to ‘*Gentility*’ and he boasted of having been born ‘a genuine Sans culotte, my veins uncontaminated with one drop of gentility’; he blessed his situation of ‘being & *having been, Poor!*’ (CL II. 881, I. 303, II. 750). Eight years later, Coleridge would suggest that Unitarianism was the proper religion for a man ‘whose Reason would make him an Atheist but whose Heart and Common sense will not permit him to be so’ (CN II. 2448); a keen insight into himself when young.

In May 1793 Coleridge was using his talent for eloquent interjection in the public hearings concerning a young Fellow of his own Cambridge college, William Frend. Frend had become a Unitarian, and had written in favour of non-Anglicans being allowed to enter the professions and hold Government

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

appointments; University dons were currently required to subscribe to the thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. Expelled from his fellowship for his beliefs, Friend had appealed to the University Senate; Coleridge joined other students in the public gallery to cheer and heckle, and was nearly seized by the University Proctor who came to arrest the most voluble of the protestors. At this stage, Coleridge considered a career as a Unitarian minister; his powerful belief in ‘democratic principles’ was entirely contemporary but in his case religiously based too. ‘Christianity’, he insisted, ‘teaches in the most explicit terms the rights of Man’; ‘it commands it’s disciples to go every where . . . to preach these rights’ (*CL* I. 282).³

By the autumn of 1793, however, extravagant living, alcohol and doing no work (‘I became a proverb to the University for Idleness’ – *CL* I. 67) had combined with his inability to handle money successfully. He ran up debts of some £150, but did not dare discuss the matter with his brothers, who were responsible for his finances. In a way that in retrospect seems characteristic, in a ‘chaos of thoughts and feelings’ (*CL* v. 84) he ran away from his problems; finding himself in a brothel may have provoked his decision. There was a tradition in his family of military service, of the kind in which boys entered the army as cadets, eventually to become officers (during his teens, his brothers had hoped to enlist him as a cadet). In accordance with his *sans culotte* sympathies, however, Coleridge went to London and signed up as a private (naming himself Silas Tomkyn Comberbache – still S.T.C.) in the 15th Light Dragoons; a crazy choice, as he could not even ride. It took further money to buy him out six months later. He went back to Cambridge in April 1794 but at Christmas left without a degree.

Pantisocrat and democrat

The reason he left was simple; he believed he had found a project and way of life for which a degree was superfluous. In mid June 1794 he had met the Oxford student and writer Robert Southey and they had jointly developed a utopian plan for an ideal society (which they called a ‘Pantisocracy’, meaning a community in which all are equal and all rule) to be established on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania, where the radical philosopher and scientist Joseph Priestley had been forced into exile. The idea consumed both men for months: ‘America really inspired Hope, & I became an exalted Being’ (*CN* II. 2398), Coleridge commentated. He later enviously recalled the days ‘while I had yet Hope and onward-looking Thoughts’ (*CN* III. 3654); together

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

he and Southey dreamed ‘of the System of no Property’ (*CL* I. 90). Southey had given up his studies at Oxford in July; Coleridge followed him by abandoning Cambridge in December 1794 to take up residence at Bristol, to be near his friend.

This meant that he was extremely hard up. Like Southey, he gave public lectures in Bristol in the spring of 1795 to generate a little income; lectures and occasional publications were almost his only means of support. What he *did* produce was often nearly extempore; he wrote a ‘Moral and Political Lecture’, he claimed, between midnight and breakfast-time of the day he delivered it. Like all his surviving lectures it was radical in its calls for ‘Equality’, but besides preaching justice it scrupulously cautioned against the excesses of the French Revolution (*L1795* 6). The lecture ‘On the Present War’ also offered a very controlled kind of radicalism, but of a wonderfully eloquent and witty sort. Soldiers are seditiously defined as those who ‘might MURDER with impunity’ – only for Coleridge to add, in the Errata: ‘Page 61, for murder read Fight for his King and Country’ (*L1795* 70 n. 2).

In August 1795, however, Coleridge quarrelled badly with Southey. The latter had inherited money and property, and changed his opinions. Coleridge suspected that ‘No man’s Heart can wholly stand up against Property’ (*CL* II. 750), while Southey, for reasons still unclear, believed that Coleridge ‘behaved wickedly’.⁴ The Pantisocratic project was, anyhow, abandoned. Coleridge turned to two of the great contentious issues of the day in England, the parliamentary Treason and Sedition Bills against liberty of the press and liberty of speech; these had been introduced late in 1795 following an occasion when King George III himself had been shouted at by a crowd. Coleridge brought out another pamphlet in December 1795, summing up his charge against the so-called ‘Gagging Bills’: ‘The first of these Bills is an attempt to assassinate the Liberty of the Press: the second, to smother the Liberty of Speech’ (*L1795* 286).

A pattern was, however, emerging, in which Coleridge’s need for friends, love and admiration led him into alliances founded on the strength of his feelings at a particular moment. Because of his eloquence and gift of language, he could be taken for someone deeply convinced of certain principles, when he was more deeply motivated by his attraction to – or rejection of – an individual or a group. Some people saw this. Charlotte, the wife of the tannery owner and democrat Tom Poole, for example, described Coleridge as a young man of ‘democratick principles . . . entirely led away by the feelings of the moment’ (*L1795* xxix). The young Coleridge certainly said things about politics and government that were extreme. Later in life, perhaps rightly, he denied having

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Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

been extreme. He originally believed, optimistically, that people liberated from tyrannical authority would properly enjoy the ‘rights of Man’; he came to believe that the job of authority (secular and religious) was to restrain people from misusing their rights.

In October 1795, he married Sarah Fricker, the sister of the woman whom Southey would marry at the start of November. Southey had maliciously insisted to Coleridge that, because of the ‘marked attentions’ and ‘direct addresses’ (CN III. 3648) which Coleridge had paid to Sarah, she had turned down two other potential husbands, so that he was now obliged to marry her. Coleridge, with his ‘Quick sense of Honor’ and dread of his own conscience, felt trapped; he married Sarah ‘for honor & not for love!’ (CL II. 1156) and by the spring of 1796 she was expecting their first child. Writing poetry and journalism seemed the only thing for Coleridge to do, while they lived as cheaply as possible in the country (first near Bristol, later at Nether Stowey in Somerset). They were, however, very poor; Coleridge later described the ‘bare walls of his Garret’ and the problem for a pregnant Sarah of having to live up ‘3 pairs of stairs’ (CN III. 3561). They were rescued by various people; Poole organised £40 cash a year, and the young Bristol bookseller and publisher Joseph Cottle paid Coleridge for a volume of poems (London publishers had turned down the idea).

At this stage, Coleridge, though writing pamphlets and poetry like many another educated young man, had no particular plan or ambition to be a writer; and of all the careers which might have been recommended to him, writing for money would not have been one. If he had not still been a Unitarian, a career in the established Church would have been a natural recourse. However, a life as a Unitarian minister also seemed a real opportunity, and he spoke as a lay-preacher until 1798. Another natural ambition would have been a University fellowship but – again – his Unitarianism made that impossible.

In fact, as Byron realised, ‘Coleridge might have been any thing.’⁵ He was a convincing preacher and lecturer; more than once he planned to earn his living by teaching; as a writer he was astonishingly fluent; he would prove a brilliant political journalist. He also worked successfully as private secretary to Sir Alexander Ball, the governor of Malta, in 1804–5; his surviving official letters are models of concision and directness (CL II. 1150–6). As it was, the fact that in 1796 Cottle published his poems (and also paid his friends for a volume he shared with them) gave Coleridge a reputation which he continued to exploit, while the extent to which he was prepared to live off others shocked a man like Southey, who with some envy described Coleridge as ‘one who has neither the feelings nor habits of honest independence, & who always indulges himself careless of consequences.’⁶

Journalist

Buoyed up, nevertheless, by his marriage, his lectures, his poems and his pamphlets, Coleridge planned to edit a newspaper which would further democratic principles, and in which he could also publish his poetry. *The Watchman* would be a mixture of political journalism, serious and funny, most of it lifted from other newspapers, along with parliamentary reports and characteristically Coleridgian commentary; it would be supported by subscribers in nonconformist circles (Coleridge went to the Midlands and the North in the spring of 1796 on a publicity campaign).

It was especially concerned with reporting serious miscarriages of justice, with attacking the slave trade, with the Treason and Convention Bills and, above all, with criticising the continuing war with France. Its poetry was, by the standards of contemporary newspapers, excellent; its jokes sometimes good ones, with Coleridge engaging, for example, in a comparison between the Church establishment and the solar system (Bishop Pretyman getting typecast as Venus). He also provided parodies of *Court News*: ‘On Thursday the Queen had a drawing-room at St James’s Palace, and all that –.’⁷ Such a witticism in itself would have been enough to label him seditious.

A jocular if scholarly essay on fast days in the second issue, however – containing an epigraph from Isaiah: *Wherefore my Bowels shall sound like an Harp* – cost *The Watchman* pious subscribers when it could not afford to lose a single one. To avoid stamp duty it was being issued every eight days and was attempting to undercut other such newspapers by being priced at 4d, not 4½d. But it carried no advertisements, and to be a success would have needed to sell a large number of copies. Some people stopped subscribing because there was not enough poetry in it; ‘a still larger number’ stopped ‘because it contained too much’ (*Watchman* 374). Coleridge also found that he could not recover from his London distributor the money the paper was earning. Every issue turned out to be costing him money rather than bringing it in; he had no choice but to cut his losses and stop publication. He had occasion one morning to scold the servant girl Nanny about the quantities of paper she was using to lay the fire, only for her to reply ‘la, Sir . . . why it is only “WATCHMEN”’ (*BL* I. 187). Years later he recalled the ‘near 100£’ (*CL* VI. 1034) he lost. He had to rely on Poole to pay the printer’s bill.

He had the clever person’s ability to laugh at his own mistakes as a way of putting them behind him, and the comic lightness of his tone about his early democratic ventures – ‘I have snapped my squeaking baby-trumpet of sedition’ he later repeated to two older men, to impress them with his maturity

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Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

(CL I. 240, 397) – is not altogether to be trusted. *The Watchman* had created for him a reputation as a democrat, and as a result he was able to get work writing political journalism and political poetry in London newspapers. This is a side of Coleridge's work which is not taken with much seriousness today, but it was something to which he turned his skills over and over again. His prose at this date is in fact a good deal more promising than his poetic rants in poems like 'Religious Musings', which spends 420 lines doing little more than blow rhetorical trumpets. In consultation with Daniel Stuart, the editor of the *Morning Post* (and later of the *Courier*), Coleridge produced leading articles for the Whig opposition, pieces opposed to the Tory Prime Minister William Pitt and the conduct of the war against France.

To do such work successfully, however, he needed to be in London. The years 1798, 1799–1800, and 1801–2 were consequently marked by his spending periods of time in the capital with his work appearing in the *Morning Post*. His work culminated in a portrait of Pitt (19 March 1800) written (Coleridge claimed) in a single evening which was widely praised; it was the kind of psychological demolition of a public figure that feels intensely modern. It describes how Pitt had fatally learned the 'management of *words*', and argues that such an ability, 'though it destroys genius, will often create, and always foster, talent'. And Pitt's talent was for '*general phrases*'; for 'Jacobinism' in the following extract, in the twenty-first century we might read 'Terrorism': 'Press him to an *individual* fact of advantage to be derived from a war – and he answers, SECURITY! Call upon him to particularise a crime, and he exclaims – JACOBINISM! Abstractions defied by abstractions! Generalities by generalities!' But though Pitt is (only) talented, he is also terrifyingly single-minded; his whole track has been 'as curveless as the motion of a fascinated reptile!' (*EHT* I. 220, 223). Coleridge's essay on Napoleon as companion piece never materialised, in spite of a flurry of promises. The Pitt essay, however, remains a model of journalism both populist and searching.

Friend

Coleridge's eloquence and intelligence deeply impressed everyone he met; during his twenties he was especially attracted to men and groups who, like brothers, offered him companionship and secure advice. Such men were often older than himself (at school Thomas Middleton, later Tom Poole, the minister John Estlin, later still the poet William Wordsworth), or their experiences made them (like Southey) at least seem so. They offered him the kinds of stability and reassurance of which his quickness of mind, constant excitement with the new, eloquence and deftness with language sometimes left him bereft. His friendship

with William and his sister Dorothy Wordsworth, in particular, helped him concentrate on his poetry, and between the autumn of 1797 and the summer of 1798 he wrote most of the poems for which he is still famous (discussed in chapter 2). Wordsworth was in many ways a moral rather than a literary model for Coleridge; slow where Coleridge was quick, plodding where Coleridge was facile, and (to begin with) absolutely unknown compared with Coleridge, whose journalism and 1796 poetry volume had brought him some reputation. But Wordsworth had been in France in 1790, 1791–2 and (perhaps) again in 1793; he had had long discussions in France with committed revolutionaries; he had seen the results of the Revolution and also experienced the threats of the Terror, circumstances of which Coleridge had only heard. Wordsworth was, if anything, a more convinced opponent of the French war and the British Government than Coleridge was, though his attempts in 1794 to help found a political journal, the *Philanthropist*, had come to nothing.

Wordsworth's own rebellion against his family, both politically and in his determination to be a poet, had also been deliberate and painstaking. By the middle 1790s he was carving out a kind of poetry writing, in simple language and either blank verse or ballad metres, which immediately caught Coleridge's attention; this was perhaps the language and writing of the democratic revolution Coleridge had been so interested in. It was also a way of getting away from the literary language Coleridge had so far deployed in energetic, at times horribly rhetorical, hymns to ideals (and idealists). Coleridge's prose had been limited to the production of short-lived journalism or even shorter-lived harangue, he had spent a vast amount of energy in speculations about an ideal community which had come to nothing and he had married the wrong person. Meanwhile Wordsworth had been experiencing revolution at first hand and quietly working his way into a truly revolutionary kind of poetry, while deciding about the right place to live and the proper companions for his life.

Wordsworth was exactly the kind of moral exemplum to whom Coleridge was attracted, while Coleridge was characterised by a huge ability to be lovable, as Wordsworth and Dorothy discovered as they fell under his spell. They found his 'Imagination winged with fire inspiring and rejoicing' (*CL* II. 1103) – the words of his friend, the great chemist Humphry Davy – and his 'creative energy' was irresistible. As chapter 2 shows, Wordsworth was caught up in the development of all the ambitious new poetry that Coleridge embarked on between 1797 and 1802, while, for his part, Wordsworth found himself pressured into writing the kind of philosophical poetry in which Coleridge believed. Coleridge went to Germany with Wordsworth and Dorothy in 1799 and in 1800 he followed them to the Lake District, where he and Sarah and their children lived thenceforth.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge***Self-watcher**

Coleridge had grown up with what he once most accurately called a ‘self-watching subtilizing mind’ (*CPI* I. 454). The self-watching quality could be paralysing, though at times it enabled him to enquire into and vividly describe his own mental and emotional processes. When for example a surgeon was attempting to extract a thorn from his ankle in 1801, he gained (he insisted) considerable insight into ‘the exceedingly interesting & obscure subject of *Pain*’: ‘O! how I *watched* myself while the Lancet was at my Leg!’ (*CL* II. 772). ‘I so attentively watch my own Nature, that my worst Self-delusion is, a compleat Self-Knowledge’ (*CL* II. 882). The only problem was that he did *not* communicate what (on that occasion) he learned about pain. His ambition to write about it faded; his potential understanding died with the pain.

The ‘subtilizing’ capacity was also in its own way inhibiting, as it offered him ever further ways of considering a subject; some of his later work, and certainly his later conversation and lecturing, consisted of little except subtle elaborations of what he had started to say. At its best, however, it could be an incomparable gift. Following a night of ‘Dreams full of Grief & bitter weeping’ in 1804, for example, he immediately worked his feelings into a kind of poetry:

Oft in his sleep he wept, & waking found
 His Pillow cold beneath his Cheek with Tears,
 And found his Dreams
 (So faithful to the Past, or so prophetic)
 That when he thought of what had made him weep,
 He did not recollect it as a Dream,
 And spite of open eyes & the broad Sunshine
 The feverish Man perforce must weep again.

(CPI I. 762–3)

He noted to himself: ‘This in rhyme, & either greatly compressed or highly touched up’. But having written that down, he could set to and analyse his experience in prose:

And now for the Metaphysics/In cases of violent weeping is there not always Pity mixed & predominant? – Do we not pity our past Selves? – And Pity has always pleasure as one of its component Parts. Whence derived? Whence augmented? Sympathy will often make a Sufferer weep /. Is not this always accompanied by Hope? (*CN* II. 2018)

And so on, for another eleven lines.