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978-0-521-74643-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge

John Worthen

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

Author of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 'Kubla Khan' and 'Christabel', and co-author with Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the great writers and thinkers of the Romantic revolution. This innovative Introduction discusses his interest in language and his extraordinary private notebooks, as well as his poems, his literary criticism and his biography. John Worthen presents a range of readings of Coleridge's work, along with biographical context and historical background. Discussion of Coleridge's notebooks alongside his poems illuminates this rich material and finds it a way into his creativity. Readers are invited to see Coleridge as an immensely self-aware, witty and charismatic writer who, although damaged by an opium habit, responded to and in his turn influenced the literary, political, religious and scientific thinking of his time.

JOHN WORTHEN is Professor Emeritus at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of, among other books, *The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons and the Wordsworths in 1802* (2001) and *T. S. Eliot: A Short Biography* (2010).

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521746434

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First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-76282-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-74643-4 Paperback

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Illustrations

- | | |
|---|----------------|
| 1 'Kubla Khan' (British Library Add. MS 50, 847 f.1). | <i>page</i> 29 |
| 2 Notebooks in the British Library before rebinding
(courtesy of <i>The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> ,
vol. I, Illustration no. I, opposite p. xx). | 43 |
| 3 Inside front cover of Notebook 21 (British Library Add. MS
47,518 f.1 ^v : <i>The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> , I.
322, 378, 379, 1612, 1613; II. 2426). | 60 |

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Preface

Down to the middle of the twentieth century, it was as a tragic, procrastinating, marvellous failure that Samuel Taylor Coleridge was most easily perceived. His great enemy the writer William Hazlitt had helped cement Coleridge's reputation as the ridiculously unproductive author of a few famous poems, the rambling prose book *Biographia Literaria* and a couple of religious polemics – nothing else surviving of him save memories of his irrepressible talk.

Today, seeing his collected works stretching out on library shelves in fifty volumes, readers are less likely to assume that he failed to write much. The twenty-first century has not only judged Coleridge to be the author of some great poetry and prose ('Kubla Khan', 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 'Christabel', *Biographia Literaria*, for sure) but has come to view him and his poetry as iconic. The 'person from Porlock' who interrupted the writing of 'Kubla Khan' is a figure of mythic dimension, 'The Ancient Mariner' can today be found in many places and forms (illustrations by Gustave Doré, a song by Iron Maiden, a film by Raul daSilva, a gift shop in San Diego), while everywhere on the web are versions of a haunting Coleridge notebook entry: 'If a man could pass thro' Paradise in a Dream, & have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his Soul had really been there, & found that flower in his hand when he awoke – Aye! and what then?'¹ His contemporaries thought of Coleridge as a metaphysician (baffling or illuminating according to their point of view), as a philosopher (influenced by the German writers Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schelling before most English philosophers had even heard of them), as a writer about religion and as the greatest talker of his age. Today, we are more interested in him as a poet, as an opium experimenter, as someone caught up in revolutionary politics, and in particular as a writer who described what he called 'the Flux and Reflux of my Mind within itself.'²

I present here a range of readings of Coleridge's work, along with some biographical context and historical background, but concentrating upon his own language and writing. I look at a number of his poems beside the famous ones, but also stress the range of his achievements; he himself was aware of 'a distracting Manifoldness'³ in what he did. I explore areas where most readers

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will not venture without a guide, in particular the mixture of observation, quotation, dream material, philosophy and self-reflection in the ‘undiscovered treasure’⁴ of Coleridge’s notebooks. There are also chapters on his poetry, his criticism and on his language.

It is certainly appropriate that he was the first person ever recorded using the word ‘psychologically’; his intelligence as a psychologist feels entirely modern. His attempts to describe his own processes of apprehension, realisation and memory were at the heart of his achievement as a writer. He insisted, for example, on ‘The dependence of ideas, consequently of Memory, &c on states of bodily or mental *Feeling*’; to him, body and soul were as inseparably linked as ideas and feelings, and as a writer he did his best to demonstrate it. He would, for example, question ‘what is so constantly affirmed, that there is no Sex in Souls’ and would answer ‘I doubt it – I doubt it exceedingly’.⁵ How could one be oneself and not in some way be one’s own body? Such clarity and independence of thinking appeared not just in his notebooks and letters but in almost everything he wrote; it would doubtless have appeared in the novel he often considered writing, and to which in December 1815 he gave the title *Men and Women, a Novel*.⁶

After he became addicted to opium in the late 1790s, Coleridge’s working life changed for ever. By virtue of an excellent memory and considerable help from others, however, he was able to write compellingly and at times superbly. He amazed even those who knew him well with his creativity in adversity, as when he proved able to write a whole number (6,500 words or more) of his newspaper *The Friend* ‘in two days’.⁷ Even at his worst he was possessed of a ‘sense of responsibility to my own mind’⁸ and it is often in his unfinished and fragmentary writings (poems, letters, notebooks, shorter works, marginalia in other people’s books and uncompleted projects) that modern readers find him most powerful. This *Introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge* aims to suggest how appealingly and brilliantly he wrote, and to recommend further reading in the huge range of work he produced.

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Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Dr Linda Bree for giving me the opportunity to write this book and for her advice and help. Anne Serafin and Jim O'Hare lovingly initiated a huge number of improvements; Steven Vine read a draft and commented most helpfully. Hilary Hillier made detailed notes for me. Sue Wilson was her admirably savage self and provoked many clarifications; Peter Preston talked to me wisely. David Ellis read the final draft and made some valuable suggestions. Simon Collins made a beautiful job of the cover illustration.

Like everyone working on Coleridge, I am indebted to the Bollingen editions of Coleridge's Notebooks and Works.

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Abbreviations

Works by Coleridge

- CL *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1956–71)
- CN *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn *et al.*, 5 vols. (New York, Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Routledge, 1957–2002)

Bollingen edition of Coleridge's Works

All London and Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- AR *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (1993)
- BL *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (1982)
- C&S *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. John Colmer (1976)
- CM *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley and H. J. Jackson, 6 vols. (1980–2001)
- CPI *Poetical Works I*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 2 vols. (2001)
- CPII *Poetical Works II*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 2 vols. (2001)
- CPIII *Poetical Works III*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 2 vols. (2001)
- EHT *Essays on His Times in 'The Morning Post' and 'The Courier'*, ed. David V. Erdman, 3 vols. (1978)
- Friend *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols. (1969)
- L1795 *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (1971)
- LL *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, 2 vols. (1987)
- LPhil *Lectures 1818–1819: On the History of Philosophy*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols. (2000)
- Logic *Logic*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson (1981)

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<i>LS</i>	<i>Lay Sermons</i> , ed. R. J. White (1972)
<i>OM</i>	<i>Opus Maximum</i> , ed. Thomas McFarland (2002)
<i>SWF</i>	<i>Shorter Works and Fragments</i> , ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols. (1995)
<i>TT</i>	<i>Table Talk</i> , ed. Carl R. Woodring, 2 vols. (1990)
<i>Watchman</i>	<i>The Watchman</i> , ed. Lewis Patton (1970)

Other works

<i>LW</i> II. 1	<i>The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years</i> , vol. II, part 1, 1806–1811, ed. E. de Selincourt and Mary Moorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969)
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> , second edition, CD-ROM Version 3.1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 2005)
<i>PW</i>	<i>The Prose Works of William Wordsworth</i> , ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974)