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.

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Biography (2010).
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustrations</th>
<th>viii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter 1 Early life and contexts: 1772–1802

1. The least beloved
2. Unitarian
3. Pantisocrat and democrat
4. Journalist
5. Friend
6. Self-watcher
7. Metaphysician and Kantian
8. Opium user
9. Lover
10. Writer

### Chapter 2 Poetry

18. The poetry of extreme states
20. The unfinished, the revised
21. ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’
22. ‘Christabel’
23. ‘Kubla Khan’
24. ‘Conversation’ poems
25. ‘Letter’ poems and ‘Dejection’
26. ‘Asra’ poems
27. Theatre writing
28. Later poetry
## Contents

### Chapter 3  Notebooks
- Keeping notebooks 43
- A writer’s life: nine kinds of notebook entry 44
- The notebook as commonplace book 48
- Dreams, fantasies, terrors 50
- Travel writing and the natural world 51
- Coleridge revealed 55
- What do the notebooks omit? 57
- Reading the notebooks 59

### Chapter 4  Mid-life works and contexts: 1803–1814
- *The Friend* 65
- Coleridge and the operation of the senses 69
- Incipient disaster 71

### Chapter 5  Language
- The right word 74
- The language of thought 75
- The origins of language 77
- Grammar 79
- Words as things 80
- Poetry and prose 82
- The natural language of poetry 83
- Copying and coining 84
- Language’s debt to Coleridge 88

### Chapter 6  Criticism
- Shakespeare lectures 90
- Other Shakespeare criticism 93
- Criticism in notebooks and marginalia 94
- *Biographia Literaria* 97
- The attack on Wordsworth 99
- Fancy and Imagination 103
- The publication and problems of the *Biographia* 105
- The nature of the *Biographia* 106
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>vii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Another kind of autobiography</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual property and the <em>Biographia</em></td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onwards from the <em>Biographia</em></td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 7 Later works and contexts: 1815–1834**

| Religion | 115 |
| *Lay Sermons* | 116 |
| *Faustus* | 118 |
| *Aids to Reflection* | 119 |
| *On the Constitution of the Church and State* | 121 |
| Later life | 122 |
| Talking and thinking | 123 |
| *Logic and Opus Maximum* | 127 |

**Afterword**

| Notes | 132 |
| Further reading | 139 |
| Index | 142 |
Illustrations

1. ‘Kubla Khan’ (British Library Add. MS 50, 847 f.1).
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?’ 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’.

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’ in what he did. I explore areas where most readers
x Preface

will not venture without a guide, in particular the mixture of observation, quotation, dream material, philosophy and self-reflection in the 'undiscovered treasure' 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’.

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*.

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’. Even at his worst he was possessed of a ‘sense of responsibility to my own mind’ 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.
Acknowledgements

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

Works by Coleridge


Bollingen edition of Coleridge’s Works


L1795 Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (1971)


xii
List of abbreviations

LS  Lay Sermons, ed. R. J. White (1972)
TT  Table Talk, ed. Carl R. Woodring, 2 vols. (1990)
Watchman  The Watchman, ed. Lewis Patton (1970)

Other works