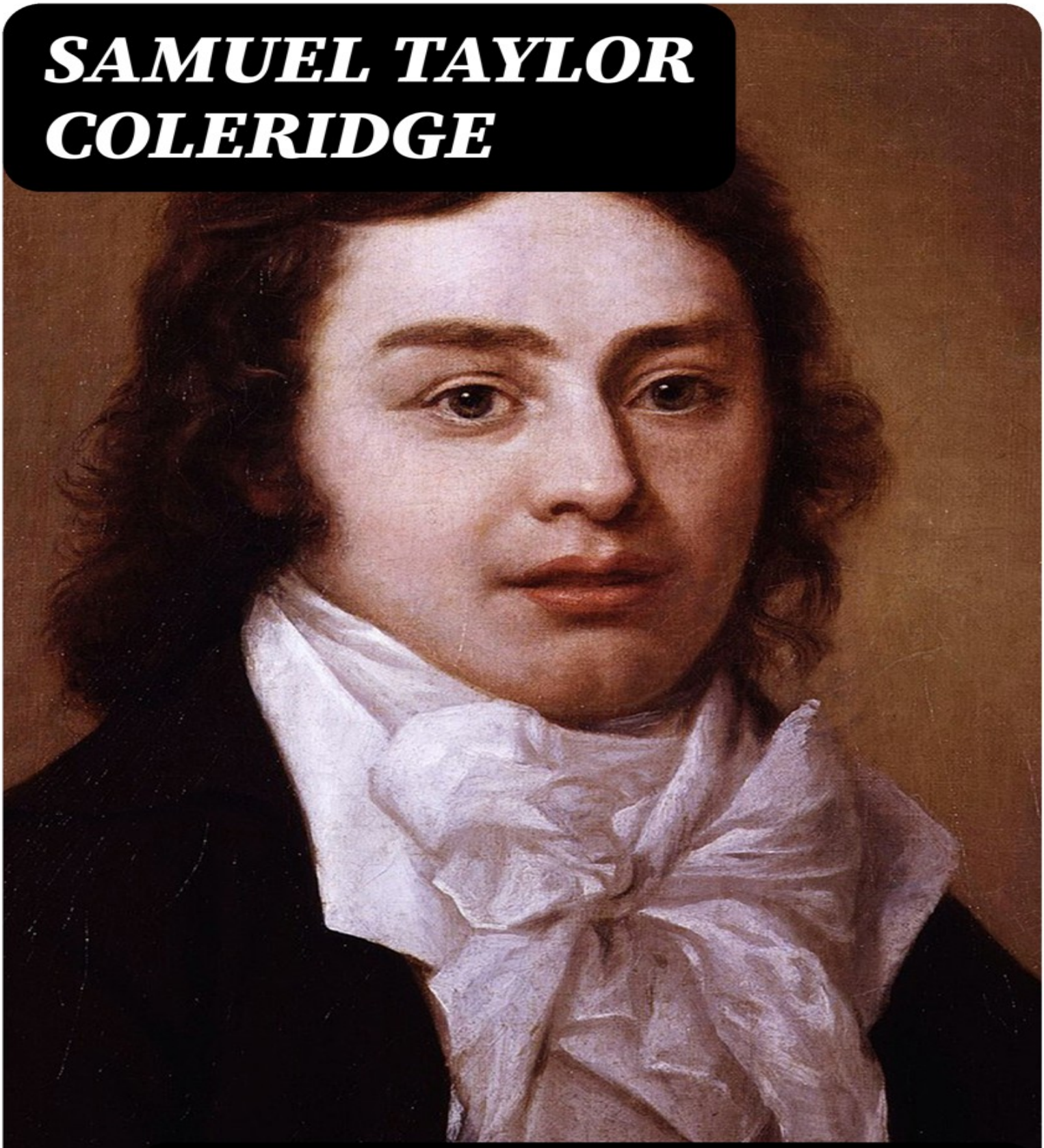
SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE



POEMS OF COLERIDGE

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Poems of Coleridge

EAN 8596547174233

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Table of Contents

In one of Rossetti's invaluable notes on poetry, he tells us that to him "the leading point about Coleridge's work is its human love." We may remember Coleridge's own words:

"To be beloved is all I need,
And whom I love, I love indeed."

Yet love, though it is the word which he uses of himself, is not really what he himself meant when using it, but rather an affectionate sympathy, in which there seems to have been little element of passion. Writing to his wife, during that first absence in Germany, whose solitude tried him so much, he laments that there is "no one to love." "Love is the vital air of my genius," he tells her, and adds: "I am deeply convinced that if I were to remain a few years among objects for whom I had no affection, I should wholly lose the powers of intellect."

With this incessant, passionless sensibility, it was not unnatural that his thirst for friendship was stronger than his need of love; that to him friendship was hardly distinguishable from love. Throughout all his letters there is a series of causeless explosions of emotion, which it is hardly possible to take seriously, but which, far from being

insincere, is really, no doubt, the dribbling overflow of choked-up feelings, a sort of moral leakage. It might be said of Coleridge, in the phrase which he used of Nelson, that he was "heart-starved." Tied for life to a woman with whom he had not one essential sympathy, the whole of his nature was put out of focus; and perhaps nothing but "the joy of grief," and the terrible and fettering power of luxuriating over his own sorrows, and tracing them to first principles, outside himself or in the depths of his sub- consciousness, gave him the courage to support that long, everpresent divorce.

Both for his good and evil, he had never been able to endure emotion without either diluting or intensifying it with thought, and with always self-conscious thought. He uses identically the same words in writing his last, deeply moved letter to Mary Evans, and in relating the matter to Southey. He cannot get away from words; coming as near to sincerity as he can, words are always between him and his emotion. Hence his over-emphasis, his rhetoric of humility. In 1794 he writes to his brother George: "Mine eyes gush out with tears, my heart is sick and languid with the weight of unmerited kindness." Nine days later he writes to his brother James: "My conduct towards you, and towards my other brothers, has displayed a strange combination of madness, ingratitude, and dishonesty. But you forgive me. May my Maker forgive me! May the time arrive when I shall have forgiven myself!" Here we see both what he calls his "gangrened sensibility" and a complete abandonment to the feelings of the moment. It is always a self- conscious abandonment, during which he watches himself with approval, and seems to be saying: "Now that is truly 'feeling'!" He can never concentrate himself on any emotion; he swims about in floods of his own tears. With so little sense of reality in anything, he has no sense of the reality of direct emotion, but is preoccupied, from the moment of the first shock, in exploring it for its universal

principle, and then nourishes it almost in triumph at what he has discovered. This is not insincerity; it is the metaphysical, analytical, and parenthetic mind in action. "I have endeavoured to feel what I ought to feel," he once significantly writes.

Coleridge had many friends, to some of whom, as to Lamb, his friendship was the most priceless thing in life; but the friendship which meant most to him, not only as a man, but as a poet, was the friendship with Wordsworth and with Dorothy Wordsworth. "There is a sense of the word Love," he wrote to Wordsworth in 1812, "in which I never felt it but to you and one of your household." After his quarrel in that year he has "an agony of weeping." "After fifteen years of such religious, almost superstitious idolatry and self-sacrifice!" he laments. Now it was during his first, daily companionship with the Wordsworths that he wrote almost all his greatest work. "The Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel" were both written in a kind of rivalry with Wordsworth; and the "Ode on Dejection" was written after four months' absence from him, in the first glow and encouragement of a return to that one inspiring comradeship. Wordsworth was the only poet among his friends whom he wholly admired, and Wordsworth was more exclusively a poet, more wholly absorbed in thinking poetry and thinking about poetry, and in a thoroughly practical way, than almost any poet who has ever lived. It was not only for his solace in life that Coleridge required sympathy; he needed the galvanizing of continual intercourse with a poet, and with one to whom poetry was the only thing of importance. Coleridge, when he was by himself, was never sure of this; there was his *magnum opus*, the revelation of all philosophy; and he sometimes has doubts of the worth of his own poetry. Had Coleridge been able to live uninterruptedly in the company of the Wordsworths, even with the unsympathetic wife at home, the opium in the cupboard, and the *magnum opus* on the

desk, I am convinced that we should have had for our reading to-day all those poems which went down with him into silence.

What Coleridge lacked was what theologians call a "saving belief" in Christianity, or else a strenuous intellectual immorality. He imagined himself to believe in Christianity, but his belief never realized itself in effective action, either in the mind or in conduct, while it frequently clogged his energies by weak scruples and restrictions which were but so many internal irritations. He calls upon the religion which he has never firmly apprehended to support him under some misfortune of his own making; it does not support him, but he finds excuses for his weakness in what seem to him its promises of help. Coleridge was not strong enough to be a Christian, and he was not strong enough to rely on the impulses of his own nature, and to turn his failings into a very actual kind of success. When Blake said, "If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise," he expressed a profound truth which Nietzsche and others have done little more than amplify. There is nothing so hopeless as inert or inactive virtue: it is a form of life grown putrid, and it turns into poisonous, decaying matter in the soul. If Coleridge had been more callous towards what he felt to be his duties, if he had not merely neglected them, as he did, but justified himself for neglecting them, on any ground of intellectual or physical necessity, or if he had merely let them slide without thought or regret, he would have been more complete, more effectual, as a man, and he might have achieved more finished work as an artist.

To Coleridge there was as much difficulty in belief as in action, for belief is itself an action of the mind. He was always anxious to believe anything that would carry him beyond the limits of time and space, but it was not often that he could give more than a speculative assent to even

the most improbable of creeds. Always seeking fixity, his mind was too fluid for any anchor to hold in it. He drifted from speculation to speculation, often seeming to forget his aim by the way, in almost the collector's delight over the curiosities he had found in passing. On one page of his letters he writes earnestly to the atheist Thelwall in defence of Christianity; on another page we find him saying, "My Spinosism (if Spinosism it be, and i' faith 'tis very like it)"; and then comes the solemn assurance: "I am a Berkleyan." Southey, in his rough, uncomprehending way, writes: "Hartley was ousted by Berkeley, Berkeley by Spinoza, and Spinoza by Plato; when last I saw him Jacob Behmen had some chance of coming in. The truth is that he plays with systems"; so it seemed to Southey, who could see no better. To Coleridge all systems were of importance, because in every system there was its own measure of truth. He was always setting his mind to think about itself, and felt that he worked both hard and well if he had gained a clearer glimpse into that dark cavern. "Yet I have not been altogether idle," he writes in December, 180O, "having in my own conceit gained great light into several parts of the human mind which have hitherto remained either wholly unexplained or most falsely explained." In March, 1801, he declares that he has "completely extricated the notions of time and space." "This," he says, "I have *done*; but I trust that I am about to do more—namely, that I shall be able to evolve all the five senses, and to state their growth and the causes of their difference, and in this evolvement to solve the process of life and consciousness." He hopes that before his thirtieth year he will "thoroughly understand the whole of Nature's works." "My opinion is this," he says, defining one part at least of his way of approach to truth, "that deep thinking is attainable only by a man of deep feeling, and that all truth is a species of revelation." On the other hand, he assures us, speaking of that *magnum opus* which weighed upon him and supported him to the end of his life,

"the very object throughout from the first page to the last [is] to reconcile the dictates of common sense with the conclusions of scientific reasoning."

This *magnum opus*, "a work which should contain all knowledge and proclaim all philosophy, had," says Mr. Ernest Coleridge, "been Coleridge's dream from the beginning." Only a few months before his death, we find him writing to John Sterling: "Many a fond dream have I amused myself with, of your residing near me, or in the same house, and of preparing, with your and Mr. Green's assistance, my whole system for the press, as far as it exists in any *systematic* form; that is, beginning with the Propyleum, On the Power and Use of Words, comprising Logic, as the Canons of *Conclusion*, as the criterion of *Premises*, and lastly as the discipline and evolution of Ideas (and then the Methodus et Epochee, or the Disquisition on God, Nature, and Man), the two first grand divisions of which, from the Ens super Ens to the *Fall*, or from God to Hades, and then from Chaos to the commencement of living organization, containing the whole of the Dynamic Philosophy, and the deduction of the Powers and Forces, are complete." Twenty years earlier, he had written to Daniel Stuart that he was keeping his morning hours sacred to his "most important Work, which is printing at Bristol," as he imagined. It was then to be called "Christianity, the one true Philosophy, or Five Treatises on the Logos, or Communicative Intelligence, natural, human, and divine." Of this vast work only fragments remain, mostly unpublished: two large quarto volumes on logic, a volume intended as an introduction, a commentary on the Gospels and some of the Epistles, together with "innumerable fragments of metaphysical and theological speculation." But out of those fragments no system was ever to be constructed, though a fervent disciple, J. H. Green, devoted twenty-eight years to the attempt. "Christabel" unfinished, the *magnum opus*

unachieved: both were but parallel symptoms of a mind "thought-bewildered" to the end, and bewildered by excess of light and by crowding energies always in conflict, always in escape.

Coleridge's search, throughout his life, was after the absolute, an absolute not only in thought but in all human relations, in love, friendship, faith in man, faith in God, faith in beauty; and while it was this profound dissatisfaction with less than the perfect form of every art, passion, thought, or circumstance, that set him adrift in life, making him seem untrue to duty, conviction, and himself, it was this also that formed in him the double existence of the poet and the philosopher, each supplementing and interpenetrating the other. The poet and the philosopher are but two aspects of one reality; or rather, the poetic and the philosophic attitudes are but two ways of seeing. The poet who is not also a philosopher is like a flower without a root. Both seek the same infinitude; one apprehending the idea, the other the image. One seeks truth for its beauty; the other finds beauty, an abstract, intellectual beauty, in the innermost home of truth. Poetry and metaphysics are alike a disengaging, for different ends, of the absolute element in things.

In Coleridge, metaphysics joined with an unbounded imagination, in equal flight from reality, from the notions of time and space. Each was an equal denial of the reality of what we call real things; the one experimental, searching, reasoning; the other a "shaping spirit of imagination," an embodying force. His sight was always straining into the darkness; and he has himself noted that from earliest childhood his "mind was habituated to the Vast." "I never regarded my senses," he says, "as the criteria of my belief"; and "those who have been led to the same truths step by step, through the constant testimony of their senses, seem

to want a sense which I possess." To Coleridge only mind existed, an eternal and an eternally active thought; and it was as a corollary to his philosophical conception of the universe that he set his mind to a conscious rebuilding of the world in space. His magic, that which makes his poetry, was but the final release in art of a winged thought fluttering helplessly among speculations and theories; it was the song of release.

De Quincey has said of Coleridge: "I believe it to be notorious that he first began the use of opium, not as a relief from any bodily pains or nervous irritations—for his constitution was strong and excellent—but as a source of luxurious sensations." Hartley Coleridge, in the biographical supplement to the "Biographia Literaria," replies with what we now know to be truth: "If my Father sought more from opium than the mere absence of pain, I feel assured that it was not luxurious sensations or the glowing phantasmagoria of passive dreams; but that the power of the medicine might keep down the agitations of his nervous system, like a strong hand grasping the strings of some shattered lyre." In 1795. that is, at the age of twenty-three, we find him taking laudanum; in 1796, he is taking it in large doses; by the late spring of 1801 he is under the "fearful slavery," as he was to call it, of opium. "My sole sensuality," he says of this time, "was not to be in pain." In a terrible letter addressed to Joseph Cottle in 1814 he declares that he was "seduced to the *accursed* habit ignorantly"; and he describes "the direful moment, when my pulse began to fluctuate, my heart to palpitate, and such a dreadful falling abroad, as it were, of my whole frame, such intolerable restlessness, and incipient bewilderment… for my case is a species of madness, only that it is a derangement, an utter impotence of the volition, and not of the intellectual faculties." And, throughout, it is always the pains, never the pleasures, of opium that he registers.

Opium took hold of him by what was inert in his animal nature, and not by any active sensuality. His imagination required no wings, but rather fetters; and it is evident that opium was more often a sedative than a spur to his senses.

The effect of opium on the normal man is to bring him into something like the state in which Coleridge habitually lived. The world was always a sufficiently unreal thing to him, facts more than remote enough, consequences unrelated to their causes; he lived in a mist, and opium thickened the mist to a dense yellow fog. Opium might have helped to make Southey a poet; it left Coleridge the prisoner of a cobweb-net of dreams. What he wanted was some astringent force in things, to tighten, not to loosen, the always expanding and uncontrollable limits of his mind. Opium did but confirm what the natural habits of his constitution had bred in him: an overwhelming indolence, out of which the energies that still arose intermittently were no longer flames, but the escaping ghosts of flame, mere black smoke.

At twenty-four, in a disinterested description of himself for the benefit of a friend whom he had not yet met, he declares, "the walk of the whole man indicates *indolence capable of energies*." It was that walk which Carlyle afterwards described, unable to keep to either side of the garden- path. "The moral obligation is to me so very strong a stimulant," Coleridge writes to Crabb Robinson, "that in nine cases out of ten it acts as a narcotic. The blow that should rouse, *stuns* me." He plays another variation on the ingenious theme in a letter to his brother: "Anxieties that stimulate others infuse an additional narcotic into my mind.… Like some poor labourer, whose night's sleep has but imperfectly refreshed his overwearied frame, I have sate in drowsy uneasiness, and doing nothing have thought what a deal I have to do." His ideal, which he expressed in 1797

in a letter to Thelwall, and, in 1813, almost word for word, in a poem called" The Night-Scene," was, "like the Indian Vishnu, to float about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotus, and wake once in a million years for a few minutes just to know that I was going to sleep a million years more." Observe the effect of the desire for the absolute, reinforced by constitutional indolence, and only waiting for the illuminating excuse of opium.

From these languors, and from their consequences, Coleridge found relief in conversation, for which he was always ready, while he was far from always ready for the more precise mental exertion of writing. "Oh, how I wish to be talking, not writing," he cries in a letter to Southey in 1803, "for my mind is so full, that my thoughts stifle and jam each other." And, in 1816, in his first letter to Gillman, he writes, more significantly, "The stimulus of conversation suspends the terror that haunts my mind; but when I am alone, the horrors that I have suffered from laudanum, the degradation, the blighted utility, almost overwhelm me." It was along one avenue of this continual escape from himself that Coleridge found himself driven (anywhere, away from action) towards what grew to be the main waste of his life. Hartley Coleridge, in the preface to "Table-Talk," has told us eloquently how, "throughout a long-drawn summer's day, would this man talk to you in low, equable, but clear and musical tones, concerning things human and divine"; we know that Carlyle found him "unprofitable, even tedious," and wished "to worship him, and toss him in a blanket"; and we have the vivid reporting of Keats, who tells us that, on his one meeting with Coleridge, "I walked with him, at his alderman-after-dinner pace, for near two miles, I suppose. In those two miles he broached a thousand things. Let me see if I can give you a list—nightingales—poetry—on poetical sensation—metaphysics—different genera and species of dreams—nightmare—a dream accompanied with a sense of

touch—single and double touch—a dream related—first and second consciousness—the difference explained between will and volition—so say metaphysicians from a want of smoking the second consciousness—monsters—the Kraken —mermaids—Southey believes in them—Southey's belief too much diluted—a ghost story—Good- morning—I heard his voice as he came towards me—I heard it as he moved away—I had heard it all the interval—if it may be called so." It may be that we have had no more wonderful talker, and, no doubt, the talk had its reverential listeners, its disciples; but to cultivate or permit disciples is itself a kind of waste, a kind of weakness; it requires a very fixed and energetic indolence to become, as Coleridge became, a vocal utterance, talking for talking's sake.

But beside talking, there was lecturing, with Coleridge a scarcely different form of talk; and it is to this consequence of a readiness to speak and a reluctance to write that we owe much of his finest criticism, in the imperfectly recorded "Lectures on Shakespeare." Coleridge as a critic is not easily to be summed up. What may first surprise us, when we begin to look into his critical opinions, is the uncertainty of his judgments in regard to his own work, and to the work of his friends; the curious bias which a feeling or an idea, affection or a philosophical theory, could give to his mind. His admiration for Southey, his consideration for Sotheby, perhaps in a less degree his unconquerable esteem for Bowles, together with something very like adulation of Wordsworth, are all instances of a certain loss of the sense of proportion. He has left us no penetrating criticisms of Byron, of Shelley, or of Keats; and in a very interesting letter about Blake, written in 1818, he is unable to take the poems merely as poems, and chooses among them with a scrupulous care "not for the want of innocence in the poem, but from the too probable want of it in many readers."

Lamb, concerned only with individual things, looks straight at them, not through them, seeing them implacably. His notes to the selections from the Elizabethan dramatists are the surest criticisms that we have in English; they go to the roots. Coleridge's critical power was wholly exercised upon elements and first principles; Lamb showed an infinitely keener sense of detail, of the parts of the whole. Lamb was unerring on definite points, and could lay his finger on flaws in Coleridge's work that were invisible to Coleridge; who, however, was unerring in his broad distinctions, in the philosophy of his art.

"The ultimate end of criticism," said Coleridge, "is much more to establish the principles of writing than to furnish rules how to pass judgment on what has been written by others." And for this task he had an incomparable foundation: imagination, insight, logic, learning, almost every critical quality united in one; and he was a poet who allowed himself to be a critic. Those pages of the "Biographia Literaria," in which he defines and distinguishes between imagination and fancy, the researches into the abstract entities of poetry in the course of an examination of Wordsworth's theories and of the popular objections to them, all that we have of the lectures on Shakespeare, into which he put an illuminating idolatry, together with notes and jottings preserved in the "Table-Talk," "Anima Poetæ," the "Literary Remains," and on the margins of countless books, contain the most fundamental criticism of literature that has ever been attempted, fragmentary as the attempt remains. "There is not a man in England," said Coleridge, with truth, "whose thoughts, images, words, and erudition have been published in larger quantities than *mine*; though I must admit, not *by*, nor *for*, myself." He claimed, and rightly, as his invention, a "science of reasoning and judging concerning the productions of literature, the characters and measures of public men, and the events of nations, by a

systematic subsumption of them, under principles deduced from the nature of man," which, as he says, was unknown before the year 1795. He is the one philosophical critic who is also a poet, and thus he is the one critic who instinctively knows his way through all the intricacies of the creative mind.

Most of his best criticism circles around Shakespeare; and he took Shakespeare almost frankly in the place of Nature, or of poetry. He affirms, "Shakespeare knew the human mind, and its most minute and intimate workings, and he never introduces a word, or a thought, in vain or out of place." This granted (and to Coleridge it is essential that it should be granted, for in less than the infinite he cannot find space in which to use his wings freely) he has only to choose and define, to discover and to illuminate. In the "myriad-minded man," in his "oceanic mind," he finds all the material that he needs for the making of a complete aesthetics. Nothing with Coleridge ever came to completion; but we have only to turn over the pages about Shakespeare, to come upon fragments worth more than anyone else's finished work. I find the whole secret of Shakespeare's way of writing in these sentences: "Shakespeare's intellectual action is wholly unlike that of Ben Jonson or Beaumont and Fletcher. The latter see the totality of a sentence or passage, and then project it entire. Shakespeare goes on creating, and evolving B out of A, and C out of B, and so on, just as a serpent moves, which makes a fulcrum of its own body, and seems forever twisting and untwisting its own strength. "And here are a few axioms: 'The grandest efforts of poetry are where the imagination is called forth, not to produce a distinct form, but a strong working of the mind'; or, in other words, "The power of poetry is, by a single word perhaps, to instill that energy into the mind which compels the imagination to produce the picture." "Poetry is the identity of all other knowledges," "the blossom and

fragrance of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language." "Verse is in itself a music, and the natural symbol of that union of passion with thought and pleasure, which constitutes the essence of all poetry "; "a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order," as he has elsewhere defined it. And, in one of his spoken counsels, he says: "I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose—words in their best order; poetry—the best words in the best order."

Unlike most creative critics, or most critics who were creative artists in another medium, Coleridge, when he was writing criticism, wrote it wholly for its own sake, almost as if it were a science. His prose is rarely of the finest quality as prose writing. Here and there he can strike out a phrase at red-heat, as when he christens Shakespeare "the one Proteus of the fire and flood"; or he can elaborate subtly, as when he notes the judgment of Shakespeare, observable in every scene of the "Tempest," "still preparing, still inviting, and still gratifying, like a finished piece of music"; or he can strike us with the wit of the pure intellect, as when he condemns certain work for being "as trivial in thought and yet enigmatic in expression, as if Echo and the Sphinx had laid their heads together to construct it." But for the most part it is a kind of thinking aloud, and the form is wholly lost in the pursuit of ideas. With his love for the absolute, why is it that he does not seek after an absolute in words considered as style, as well as in words considered as the expression of thought? In his finest verse Coleridge has the finest style perhaps in English; but his prose is never quite reduced to order from its tumultuous amplitude or its snake-like involution. Is it that he values it only as a medium, not as an art? His art is verse, and this he dreads, because of its too mortal closeness to his heart; the prose is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

The poetry of Coleridge, though it is closely interwoven with the circumstances of his life, is rarely made directly out of those circumstances. To some extent this is no doubt explained by a fact to which he often refers in his letters, and which, in his own opinion, hindered him not only from writing about himself in verse, but from writing verse at all. "As to myself," he writes in 1802, "all my poetic genius… is gone," and he attributes it "to my long and exceedingly severe metaphysical investigations, and these partly to ill-health, and partly to private afflictions which rendered any subjects, immediately connected with feeling, a source of pain and disquiet to me." In 1818 he writes: "Poetry is out of the question. The attempt would only hurry me into that sphere of acute feelings from which abstruse research, the mother of self-oblivion, presents an asylum." But theory worked with a natural tendency in keeping him for the most part away from any attempt to put his personal emotions into verse. "A sound promise of genius," he considered, "is the choice of subjects very remote from the private interests and circumstances of the writer himself." With only a few exceptions, the wholly personal poems, those actually written under a shock of emotion, are vague, generalized, turned into a kind of literature. The success of such a poem as the almost distressingly personal "Ode on Dejection" comes from the fact that Coleridge has been able to project his personal feeling into an outward image, which becomes to him the type of dejection; he can look at it as at one of his dreams which become things; he can sympathize with it as he could never sympathize with his own undeserving self. And thus one stanza, perhaps the finest as poetry, becomes the biography of his soul:

"There was a time when, though my path was rough,
This joy within me dallied with distress,
And all misfortunes were but as the stuff

Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine
But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.
For not to think of what I needs must feel,
But to be still and patient all I can,
And haply by abstruse research to steal
From my own nature all the natural man—
This was my sole resource, my only plan:
Till that which suits a part infects the whole,
And now is almost grown the habit of my soul."

Elsewhere, in personal poems like "Frost at Midnight," and "Fears in Solitude," all the value of the poem comes from the delicate sensations of natural things which mean so much more to us, whether or not they did to him, than the strictly personal part of the matter. You feel that there he is only using the quite awake part of himself, which is not the essential one. He requires, first of all, to be disinterested, or at least not overcome by emotion; to be without passion but that of abstract beauty, in Nature, or in idea; and then to sink into a quiet lucid sleep, in which his genius came to him like some attendant spirit.

In the life and art of Coleridge, the hours of sleep seem to have been almost more important than the waking hours. "My dreams became the substance of my life," he writes, just after the composition of that terrible poem on "The Pains of Sleep," which is at once an outcry of agony, and a yet more disturbing vision of the sufferer with his fingers on his own pulse, his eyes fixed on his own hardly awakened