

Coleridge at Cambridge

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THE CITY OF CAMBRIDGE HAS A CHERISHED STATUS IN Coleridge's life and works, so it is no surprise that his biographers have frequently looked to the city for inspiration. The sight of centuries-old buildings, walks through the city's expansive parks, and tranquil views of the River Cam along the public greens and the backs of venerable colleges easily stokes the biographer's imagination. Yet Coleridge's Cambridge hardly matches such an idealized vision: Cambridge represented a period of transition, growth, and dissolution for STC, as both he and his biographers recognize.

1 Mostly in his own words

His arrival was very downbeat, for the master, Dr. Pierce, was in Cornwall, and not due back until the summer, and there were no tutors present either. He wrote to his brother, George: "Here I am – videlicet – Jesus College ... I very luckily found Middleton at Pembroke—who (after Breakfast &c) conducted me to Jesus ... Neither Lectures, or Chapel—or any thing—is begun. The College very thin— ... So I sit down to dinner in the Hall in silence—except the noise of suction, which accompanies my eating— and rise-up ditto. I then walk off to Pembroke and sit with my friend Middleton." (CL I 15).

But in finding Middleton, he found the person whom he looked up to father-like, and who was his mainstay for the first year, as he describes to Derwent in 1822: "In my first Term, and from October till March, I read hard, and systematically. ... Six nights out of seven, as soon as chapel was over, I went to Pembroke, to Middleton's Rooms—opened the door without speaking, made and poured out the Tea and placed his cup beside his Book—went on with my Æschylus or Thucydides, as he with his Mathematics, in silence till 1/2 past 9—then closed our books at the same moment—the size and college Ale came in—& till 12 we had true Noctes atticae which I cannot to this hour think of without a strong emotion—. With what delight did I not resume my reading in my own Rooms at Jesus each following Morning. Think you a Ball or a Concert or a Lady Party, or a Literary Club, would have left me in the same state—and your studies mathematical?" (CL V 192-3)

In 1808, ill in the Courier offices in London, he "was surprized and much affected by a call from my old Schoolfellow, School-patron, and Cambridge Friend (during my first Term) Middleton. How much misery should I have escaped, in all human probability, if he had been but one year my Senior, instead of three." (CL III 69). The paternal discipline that Middleton exercised was lost when he did not do as well as expected in his finals, and so having no prospect of a fellowship, left the university. Thus ended his promise of reading mathematics with Coleridge, and so began, Coleridge believed, his downward

spiral. A curious collocation in his late biographical note (CN V 6675) ties in these two events: 'As long as Middleton was at Pembroke ... read hard, got the Greek ode &c—' but then as a result of Middleton leaving and debt worries he 'became miserable—drank bad wine'; why *bad* wine? Coleridge had earlier tried to reassure George that he was not tempted: 'I assure you, I am an Economist. I keep no company—that is, I neither give or receive invitations to wine parties; because in our college there are no end to them. I eat no suppers' (CL I 18). Within a year he was enjoying frequent wine parties. He writes an amusing note to Anne Evans: 'A party of us had been drinking wine together, and three or four freshmen were most deplorably intoxicated -- (I have too great a respect for delicacy to say Drunk). As we were returning homewards two of them fell into the gutter (or kennel.) We ran to assist one of them -- who very generously stuttered out, as he lay sprawling in the mud -- Nnn no nn no! -- ssave my ffrfrfriend there -- nnever mind me -- *I can swim*' (CL I 31).

With wine comes women, and it is one of the great sadnesses or tragedies of Coleridge's life that he could not unite platonic and sexual love. The divorce, if that is what it was, began in Cambridge. Separated from the Evans family and his weekly visits he did what many undergraduates did and visited local girls. The division within him is revealed in its starkest and simplest form in the confessional account of his life that Godwin recorded—'never told his love—loose in sexual morality—'. That collocation might be accidental, but is endorsed in a heavily enciphered note of 1808 or 9: '*Love* opposed first by *wines* then by *unchaste amours...*' (CN III 3429). The wines, good or bad, encourage an erotic energy at odds with his idea of love. However, this is no new force in Coleridge. Before he left school, he took a theme from Juvenal and wrote a poem entitled 'The Progress of Vice—an Ode', which concludes 'Gay sparkles in the Cup the generous Wine— / The mazy dance, and frail young Beauty fires— / And Virtue vanquish'd, scorn'd, with hasty flight retires' (PW 18). At Cambridge, wine sparkling in the cup, frail young beauty firing his desires, Coleridge's virtue retired, later declaring 'from my 19th to my 22nd year ... being the period that comprizes my Unchastities'—since when he has been 'a very Christian Liver' (CL II 734, May 1801), nonetheless remembering at least one 'Cambridge Girl, Sal Hall' 'with her open bosom' (CN I 1726). But this division had a tragic outcome—he married a woman he desired—'a desultory Appetite'—but whom he could not love with the 'Love makes all things pure and heavenly like itself', the love he believed he'd had for Mary Evans (CL I 145).

Coleridge sought financial freedom from the outset, as he says in his arrival letter to George. James Boyer, rightly seeing Coleridge as a spendthrift, retained his Christ's Hospital scholarship: 'I am very disagreeably situated on account of Mr B's plan of suspending the ten pound. I might daily by means of Middleton and his friends buy furniture, which will be necessary, at half the

price, which I can have it when the bills are sent in to [the] College Tutor. If I had that money I could save near ten pound of the twenty allowed by the Hospital. Besides one feels cold and naked and shivering, and gelid, and chilly and such like synonymes—without a little money in one's pocket" (CL I 15). He wants to play the gentleman, and not the shivering sizar. In February 1794, enlisted in the dragoons, attempting to escape his debts, he declared in a hysterical letter to George that "To real Happiness I bade adieu from the moment, I received my first Tutor's Bill" (CL I 67). In 1832, he remembered things a little differently: "...without my intention or knowledge, but thro' pure ignorance, got into debt for the furniture of my rooms, which I had desired the Man in my simplicity to furnish as he pleased—in fact, I never looked at them enough to know the difference between deal & mahogany... ." (CN V 6675). Whatever the real cause, Coleridge had a perfectly adequate income from various sources which he failed to manage. But he wanted the freedom to behave like a gentleman, and he did so regardless of money: 'Without a swanskin Waistcoat what is Man? I have got a swanskin waistcoat—a most attractive external' (CL I 32).

Before coming up to Cambridge, Coleridge had declared mathematics 'the Quintessence of Truth', and he would later use geometry to illustrate the ideas of Reason. But maths had 'found admirers so few and so languid' because 'though Reason is feasted, Imagination is starved: whilst Reason is luxuriating in it's proper Paradise, Imagination is wearily travelling over a dreary desart' (CL I 7). This division would re-appear in what he called a process of '*exsiccation*' a year or so prior to writing 'Dejection...', a process which lead him to 'the Root of Pure Mathematics' (CL II 714). At Cambridge, he felt that the owl mathesis, 'piping her loathsome strain', frightened the muses, rendered genius indignant, startled the 'frolic Pleasures' and congealed Wit (PW I 45). In November 1791, he had told George that 'I read Mathematics three hours a day—by which means I am always considerably before the Lectures, which are very good ones' (CL I 16).

After Middleton left in the spring of 1792, maths was no longer an attractive study, and frolic pleasures, suppers, wine-parties, unchastities and Coleridge's particular genius took control. Charles Le Grice remembers how evenings were spent in the later part of May, 1793, when William Frend was on trial before the Vice-Chancellor. Coleridge "...was very studious, but his reading was desultory and capricious. He took little exercise merely for the sake of exercise; but he was ready at any time to unbend his mind in conversation, and for the sake of this, his room ... was a constant rendezvous of conversation-loving friends ... What evenings have I spent in those rooms! What little suppers, or *sizings*, as they were called, have I enjoyed; when Aeschylus, and Plato, and Thucydides were pushed aside, with a pile of lexicons, &c. to discuss the pamphlets of the day. Ever and anon, a pamphlet issued from the pen of

Burke. There was no need of having the book before us. Coleridge had read it in the morning, and in the evening would repeat whole pages verbatim. Friend's trial was then in progress. Pamphlets swarmed from the press. Coleridge had read them all; and in the evening, with our negus, we had them *viva voce* gloriously." (*The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol II, 1834, p.606.)

This is Coleridge coming into his own—the conversationalist with an extraordinary memory, the natural centre of social and political gatherings, the radical, the prospective lecturer, all supplanting not only maths but Aeschylus, Plato and Thucydides. As a university, Cambridge had no more to offer Coleridge. Friend's Unitarianism appealed to him because it was a religion almost doctrine-free, unfettered to social norms and class structures, an energy not formalized. As Friend said in his account of his trial, "There is nothing so well calculated for the happiness of mankind as religion; but, when it becomes an instrument of policy, and is made a discriminating mark in society, all the vices of the priesthood necessarily fall into its train" (*An Account of the Proceedings in the University of Cambridge Against William Friend*, v). He draws a parallel between the aristocrats' treatment of the poor ('a spirit of aristocratick insolence') with the clergy's treatment of the laity, arising from what he calls 'the love of pre-eminence ... a fatal hindrance to the progress of christianity.' The people are not free, because all the stages of their life—marriage, birth and death—are overseen by the incantations of the priest. They lord it over 'a degraded laity' and it is to help redress this inequality that Friend seeks the education of the poor.

Coleridge will pursue ideas of religious, political and social freedom ('sweet Abode! / Ah—had none greater! And that all had such!') in the following two years. But catalysed by the debt and misery that launched him into the dragoons, and by the very bitter loss of Mary Evans, what he called 'that stormy time' (CN II 2398) was about to descend upon him, his imagination diseased, his motives hopelessly muddled. While still in the dragoons, he sums up the two years since Middleton's departure, the effective conclusion to his time at Cambridge: "What a gloomy Huddle of eccentric Actions, and dim-discovered motives! To real Happiness I bade adieu from the moment, I received my first Tutor's Bill—since that time ... my Mind has been irradiated by Bursts only of Sunshine ... Instead of manfully disclosing the disease, I concealed it with a shameful Cowardice of sensibility, till it cankered my very Heart. ... the time, which I should have bestowed on the academic studies, I employed in dreaming out wild Schemes of impossible extrication. It had been better for me, if my Imagination had been less vivid—I could not with such facility have shoved aside Reflection! ... My Affairs became more and more involved – I fled to Debauchery – fled from silent and solitary Anguish to all the uproar of senseless Mirth! Having, or imagining that I had, no stock of Happiness, to which I could look forwards, I seized the empty gratifications of

the moment, and snatched at the Foam, as the Wave passed by me' (CL I 67). Many of the anecdotes that come out of this time are amusing, and often later edited by Coleridge to that end, but 'happiness murdered by mismanaged sensibility!' (CL I 184) is the reality he later acknowledged.

2 Mostly from his biographers

Turning from primary sources such as letters and notebooks to the biographers, retelling of the same materials can feel, undoubtedly, like shifting one's eyes from the sun to the moon. Any yet that is precisely how most readers first discover Coleridge—in the imagined portraits of the biographers. So it is appropriate to look at this same city—through these same materials—in a new light.

Consider, for example, the city itself. No biography in the last half century has been as influential as Richard Holmes's two part study of Coleridge. His *Early Visions* paints an especially gloomy portrait of Coleridge's Cambridge:

"He found his own college, Jesus, bleak and unfriendly, 'the very palace of winds,' set on the edge of the city surrounded by the exposed parklands of Jesus Green. ... [H]e was assigned rooms on the ground floor, opposite the gatehouse. They were cold and damp, and he mistakenly spent much money on credit trying to furnish them comfortably. These debts were to be the cause of growing difficulties between him and his brothers. After a bad bout of flu, when he took opium without 'any disagreeable effects', he established under [Thomas] Middleton's guidance a strict, scholarly routine. Chapel twice a day, mathematical reading and lectures in the morning, walks in the afternoons, and long evenings of classical reading and translation work in Middleton's rooms until eleven o'clock at night, occasionally enlivened by taking pot-shots at the Pembroke College rats." (*Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772–1804*, 40)

Molly Lefebure, in looking closer at Coleridge's matriculation, is no less dour in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Bondage of Opium* (1974), which traces the shock of his new life at the college:

"On arrival at Cambridge he found himself deluged by a multitude of petty, but pressing, debts which he had overlooked and by the time he had settled these, he was quite unable to meet the Tutor's bills. In a typical gesture of inadequacy, S.T.C. rushed back to London with a party of friends and spent what money remained on a wild spree. He then returned to Cambridge intending suicide (or so he was later to allege to George). But he did not kill himself. After a week of agonized remorse (and very possibly opium) he packed a few things and fled again to London.

It was not only his debts that drove him to such extremes of behavior. He was convinced that he, who had gone to Cambridge so smugly confident of dazzling success, would now, in all likelihood, be doomed to failure." (106)

Walter Jackson Bate (1968), in a study equally focused on Coleridge's personal and intellectual life, accentuates the importance of *conversation* at Cambridge, presaging Coleridge as a future lecturer and Sage of Highgate:

"From the spring of his first year through that of his second, the resolutions with which he had started university life began to erode. He read as widely as ever, perhaps more so, but as curiosity led him. Intervals without regular work grew longer. His acquaintance was broadening, and friends from Christ's Hospital also began to appear at Cambridge. Charles Le Grice, now at Trinity, said that Coleridge 'was ready at any time to unbend in conversation,' and his room became 'a constant rendezvous of conversation-loving friends.'" (*Coleridge*, 12)

According to the biographers, Cambridge marked a time between times for Coleridge. No longer a child; not yet fully a man. Richard Holmes describes him as a "shambling young man" with "robust energy" (*Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772–1804*, 42). Others have perpetuated stories of Coleridge as an absent-minded pupil caught in the thrall of metaphysics. In this selection from Rosemary Ashton's otherwise underappreciated *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography* (1996), for example, the twice-told tale of Coleridge's shorn gown provides a characteristically juvenile image of the young man:

"His fellow students progressively cut off the tail of his gown when he attended lectures, with the result that he was accosted by the Master of Jesus while crossing the quadrangle one day, with the exclamation: 'Mr. Coleridge! Mr. Coleridge! when will you get rid of that shameful gown?' Coleridge, glancing over his shoulder and realizing the state of his dress, apparently replied, 'Why, sir, I think I've got rid of the greatest part of it already!'" (34)

From a reading of his biographers, the trial of William Frend rests at the center of Coleridge's Cambridge and casts a singular light on Coleridge as a young radical. In most biographies, Coleridge appears a rather heroic figure in this moment, boldly disrupting the trial in support of the Unitarian tutor. Of course, it was the president and resident fellows who first charged Frend, worrying that his *Peace and Union* (1793) would corrupt the minds of impressionable students. Frend's account of the trial, both source and commentary on these tumultuous days, contains a copy of the resolution that commenced proceedings against him:

"Resolved, that a pamphlet, entitled *Peace and Union*, lately published by W. Frend, MA fellow of this college, appears to us to have been written with the evil intent of prejudicing the clergy in the eyes of the laity, of degrading in the public esteem the doctrines and rites of the established church, and of disturbing the harmony of society. And that, as we feel it to be our particular duty to disavow principles calculated to mislead the minds of young men entrusted to our care, a copy of the said pamphlet be sent both to the vice-

chancellor of the university, and to the visitor of the college, enclosed in a letter to each, expressing our disapprobation of the opinions therein delivered, and humbly requesting them to take such measures as in their judgement may appear most proper for the effectual suppression of their dangerous tendency.” (*An Account of the Proceedings in the University of Cambridge Against William Frend* [Cambridge: B. Flower, 1793], x)

If the biographers have taken Coleridge’s side in the proceedings, then Frend’s own judgment undoubtedly plays some role. Frend, who may be forgiven for subsequent bitterness, wrote scathingly of those fellows who hid behind articles of religion in his trial:

“I have had some experience of academical men, and should be very willing to exchange a few of our most orthodox men, with long faces, and empty skulls, for the learning, talents, and integrity of infidels. Let us lay aside these idle distinctions. There is nothing so well calculated for the happiness of mankind as religion; but, when it becomes an instrument of policy, and is made a discriminating mark in society, all the vices of the priesthood necessarily fall into its train, and that, which should be only a blessing, proves, to honest minds, a source of infinite vexation.” (*An Account of the Proceedings in the University of Cambridge Against William Frend*, v)

As his studies decreased, his drinking and womanizing increased. Finally, as his personal life unraveled, Coleridge fled Cambridge. Biographers have relished in telling the tale of his fateful decision to join the 15th Light Dragoons, as in John Worthen’s *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (2010):

“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 ... 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.” (4)

Coleridge lasted only a matter of months before friends and family intervened. Still, Lawrence Hanson suggests that Coleridge’s ability to remain so long speaks to Coleridge’s remarkable “adaptability”: “In a short time he was writing their love letters for them, telling them stories and prescribing for them when they were unwell, in return for assistance with his grooming and

cleaning.” Despite his best efforts, however, Coleridge was gradually “relegated to the work of cleaning out the stables and, more particularly, of attending to the sick.” (*The Life of S. T. Coleridge: The Early Years*, 36)

Whether one looks to the primary or secondary literature, one thing is abundantly clear: Coleridge’s return to Cambridge was short lived. After a mere two months, he departed once again and never took a degree. This decisive period of learning and recklessness had finally come to an end. Biographers would long remember this as a time of growth in a city of wonder and learning, but Coleridge saw things differently. Yet, years later, Coleridge recorded thoughts in a notebook on a return to Cambridge and the profound discovery that it was he, and not the city, who had changed:

“Arrived in Cambridge, from Bury, on Thursday Noon, Oct 16, 1806—after 12 years absence. Every thing the same, thereby distinguished in its effect on the Feelings from the Scenes of Childhood revisited in Manhood, which all seem ludicrously small/the young men seemed the very same young men, I had left, the same faces, colored hair, complexions, &c/the only alteration in myself ...” (CN II 2894)