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Organising Poetry:
The Coleridge Circle, 1790 – 1798
(Oxford University Press, 2009)
by David Fairer

ON THE PENULTIMATE PAGE, David Fairer restates his guiding principle through the book: 'From the beginning I have urged that an empirical and historical concept of the "organic", which can be traced back through the eighteenth century, is a more appropriate and generous guide' to the poetry of the Coleridge circle in the 1790s, 'than the German "organic form" of the idealist critical tradition' (313). This innovative approach illuminates new insights and challenges received perspectives: it yields a wealth of fresh readings, both of familiar, and less well-known texts. In his introduction, Fairer contends that the 'revolutionary decade', often seen as 'expressing a moment when the poetic landscape changed', can be interpreted as one in which the 'voices' of the Coleridge circle were in 'creative dialogue not only with each other, but with poets of previous decades' (2). The book examines how 'these writers in the 1790s contributed to the "continued organization" of poetry at a time when all continuities, and the values and meanings they expressed, were being challenged' (2). The aim is 'to offer a fresh critical vocabulary for thinking about the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge and their friends during the 1790s' (2). Fairer replaces 'the language of idealistic "romantic" theory' with an empirical emphasis on 'how identities are developed and enriched through time' (12). He presents creativity in its 'communal and collaborative' aspects and places poetic meanings in relation to 'wider responsibilities' (12).

Following the introduction, Fairer's first three chapters ('Idealistic Tradition', 'Identity', 'History') set out his empiricist rationale, in opposition to 'the idealist tradition of organicism which became dominant in Romantic studies', and defined itself 'through a set of binaries that demonise empirical thinking' (16). Coleridge introduced the distinction between 'organic form' and 'its opposite mechanic form' in 1811, translating a passage from A.W. Schlegel in his eighth Shakespeare lecture (16). Such 'uncompromising binaries' became widely accepted in twentieth century criticism, and were 'mapped' onto an 'historical grid that showed Enlightenment mechanism overthrown by Romantic organicism' (17). However, as Fairer shows, one of the most influential of twentieth-century studies, M.H. Abrams's *The Mirror and The Lamp*, drew on Coleridgean texts written from 1815 onwards, so that Abrams's account of Coleridge's 'mental development' is 'compromised' (19). The problem in Abrams's interpretation of Romantic 'organic unity' is that the poet 'is airbrushed away' and 'appears to be essentialised into a kind of guiding intuition active within the idea' (21). Since the 1950s, however, critics have revised the idealist conception of the organic and have recognised its 'internal

tensions and conflicting drives' (27). Frederick Burwick's 'adverbial emphasis' on the organic as a process of 'forming and shaping',¹ anticipates Fairer's view of 'the organic as living principle', responsive to 'the contingencies of lived experience' (29). In Fairer's interpretation, 'the organic object' is 'not Keats's well-wrought urn, but the broken wooden cup in Wordsworth's *Ruined Cottage*': a product of contingency, in which 'human effort, need, ingenuity and endurance are inextricably part of its impure and associative meaning' (23).

Fairer traces the empiricist concept of identity and self-consciousness from Locke, through the eighteenth century, to Hazlitt in the first decade of the nineteenth. The Lockean self, crucial to Fairer's whole discussion of tradition and context, has 'the potential to span discontinuities' (37). Its 'diachronic character' contrasts with idealism's focus on 'the synchronic moment of self-awareness' (37). Locke's 'empirical understanding of identity' placed an emphasis on 'modes of organization,' and related the issue of identity to that of meaning, giving it 'a potential literary significance' (39). The activity of 'a Lockean consciousness' animates *Tristram Shandy* (40). In Sterne's novel, the 'processes of thought and writing become intimately linked', and 'selfhood becomes precarious' at the very moment in which it is confirmed (41); the eighteenth century 'organic text' is 'a testing ground where complex forces are organised' (46). The elegant engineering metaphor is developed: the 'strength' created by such a 'context' is 'tensile durability' (46). The processes of 'Lockean personal identity' are projected onto a broader canvas in Fairer's 'organic' model of history, which is neither continuous nor unified, but 'takes its character from elements of mixture, accretion and association' (60). This is well illustrated by two versions of an engraving by Piranesi (the title page to his *Prima Porte di Architettura*, 1743): the first version's suggestion of 'a gothic threat to the classical' is reworked into 'an organic convergence of the processes of growth and decay – a scene of evolving history' (61). A parallel is drawn with Burke's view of a 'cumulative historical tradition, its line scarcely decipherable in places, but organically embodying what he called "the great mysterious incorporation of the human race [...] [which] moves on through the varied tenour of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression"' (65). The pioneering eighteenth-century literary historian, Thomas Warton, adopted a similar approach: rejecting a 'taxonomic' method, Warton presented literary history as 'an uneven story', and history itself 'as process' (71). Fairer refers to 'Cowper's oak', the subject of Cowper's unfinished poem, *Yardley Oak* (1793), as an emblem of eighteenth century organic history, and includes an illustration of it from William Hayley's *Supplementary Pages to the Life of Cowper* (1806). The image of a 'misshapen core', from which new branches reach outwards, suggests 'a mixture of decay and growth', in which 'there is also considerable tensile strength and endless potential for exploration': 'Cowper's oak' is 'a powerful aesthetic statement' of the overlapping problems of identity and historical continuity (91).

¹ Frederick Burwick (ed.), *Approaches to Organic Form: Permutations in Science and Culture* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1987).

Fairer discusses *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* in terms of continuities in literary history. He revises 'new historicist' perspectives 'which implicate the poet in a presumed "social reality"', applying instead an empiricist approach that is 'organic rather than taxonomic, and [...] never rigidifies into a paradigm' (99). Fairer places *Tintern Abbey* in a 'bio-history of literary relations', in which the poet's individual voice 'echoes and mirrors many other voices': in this reading, the poem is 'profoundly unegotistical' (97). Thomas Warton's 'most influential and most personal poem', *To The River Loddon* (1777), 'established the revisiting of a river bank as the locus for a meditative self-assessment in terms of past and present' (110). Warton and his many imitators, who included Coleridge and Southey, set a context for Wordsworth, in which the syntactical variations offered 'a series of possible narratives' (113). *Tintern Abbey*, therefore, 'can be understood as recovering not just a private history, but a shared literary history, in which its language acknowledges' the sustaining 'revisitings and recoveries of other poets' (116). Such interweaving of personal with literary history was an obsessive concern for Southey: 'over a span of thirty years', Southey 'felt compelled to return to the same story' (118). The Southey who strove consistently 'to locate a restorative tradition', and to 'forge continuities', resists reduction to a simplistic 'binary of young radical and ageing conservative' (119). Influenced by Warton's 'narrative of potential continuities and retrospects' (123), Southey would 'remain acutely conscious of the tracings and retracings of history, and would continue to associate the formation of his own identity with the character of the nation's poetry' (137). Coleridge's identity in the 1790s was likewise interwoven with literary continuities: in particular, those suggested by the figure of Chatterton. Fairer is concerned, not with psychological aspects of Coleridge's identification with Chatterton, but 'the artistic influences' and literary choices underlying his 'poetic use of Chatterton' in the *Monody* (141). Of Coleridge's reworkings of the *Monody*, a process spanning 40 years, Fairer argues that the 1790 poem reflects the most 'acute awareness of the literary tradition to which it contributes', while presenting Chatterton 'as a more disturbing and radical figure' (153).

From continuities between generations of poets, Fairer moves on to consider interconnections of texts within the same volume. Reading Coleridge's *Poems* (1796) 'sequentially', Fairer elucidates the ways in which 'groupings of poems function both expressively and critically' (163). His examination of this volume is central to the book's whole rationale, showing 'how organization and unity are very different things': *Poems* (1796) was 'an organic enterprise because it was not unified' (163). A narrative of developing maturity and self-realization through the volume is resisted, 'in favour of one that accommodates checks, losses, and failures' (169). Fairer discusses *Sonnets From Various Authors* 'bibliographically' as well as 'biographically': as 'text' and 'context' – 'in the sense of *contextus*, from *contexto*, "to bind or weave together"' (193). The volume arose from the personal and domestic circumstances of

Lloyd, Lamb and Coleridge in the autumn of 1796; it marks, also, Coleridge's renewal of self-confidence in his ability to write a sonnet and place his work with that of Bowles. *Sonnet: To the River Otter* is set alongside Bowles's invocation to the powers of Harmony: two healing visions 'to counterpoise Lloyd's disturbing scenes' (198). This juxtaposition exemplifies the guiding principle of the pamphlet: to 'provide Lamb and Lloyd with sympathetic echoes and instructive accompaniments' (196). However, the sequence expands from promptings of personal sympathy and mentorship to a wider sympathetic vision, presenting images of 'colonial exploitation' and 'rural poverty', in Southey's *The Negro Slave*, and Russell's sonnet on child beggars (204). While the volume as a whole 'creates a conversation out of individual voices' (208), Coleridge's concluding sonnet indicates a turning away from his friends in a new direction which will lead him 'to a greater challenge beyond the world of the sonnet—whether his friends liked it or not' (209). This sonnet, addressing the figure of Schiller, and celebrating 'German romantic drama', opens the 'previously contained textual dialogue to project a visionary desiring self: it represents a stepping outwards to 'the world of *Kubla Khan*' (209).

'Poetic organization' is 'the medium through which friendship operates' in the Coleridge circle (213). Poetic diction, imagery and metre create the contexts, and define the limits, of Coleridge's friendships with Lloyd, Lamb and Thelwall. Lamb and Lloyd regarded friendship as 'inseparable from a process of poetic nurturing', which was interwoven with their commitment to simplicity of style (212): they tended to idealise, to seek the transcendent in the domestic, in friendship as in poetry. This excluded the kind of empirical responsiveness and 'busy simultaneity' exemplified by Coleridge in *This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison* (223). Lloyd, in particular, yearned for an 'organic connectedness [...] but one premised on a visionary moment'; this dilemma energizes Lloyd's 'extraordinarily tensile poetry', but precluded the kind of 'complex negotiations that friendship with Coleridge demanded' (234). If poetic simplicity was a moral imperative for Lamb and Lloyd, for Thelwall, leading radical and former political prisoner, poetic language was 'a test of honesty and integrity' (237). Thelwall objected to 'the frequent accent upon adjectives and weak words' in Coleridge's *Poems on Various Subjects*: Fairer shows this to be 'a sign of the two men's more fundamental differences in philosophy and religion' (240). For Thelwall, adjectives were 'mere modifiers'; his materialism allows them 'no separate existence', other than in connection 'with the things of which they describe the shades or attributes', as he put it in his *Essay, Towards a Definition of Animal Vitality* (240). Consequently, Bowles became a major ground of contention between Thelwall and Coleridge: Thelwall resists Bowles's 'subjective and affective register', his evocations of 'evanescence, liminality, or transience' (248). Coleridge's turning away from Thelwall in the autumn of 1797 was marked, most pointedly, by his failure to respond to the practical and psychological plight underlying Thelwall's hope of

finding a home, a 'refuge' in Somerset (257). Equally, though, Coleridge's indifference to the 'moral weight' Thelwall invested in his blank verse, a newly discovered medium for him in late 1797, was a poignant indication of the distance between them.

Poetic organization, central to interpretations of friendship in the 1790s, prompts Fairer to reappraise concepts of nature in this decade, commonly seen 'in terms of a pantheistic "One Life", or as the master metaphor for ideas of germination and growth' (260). Concerned with 'a spatiotemporal context in which all boundaries tend to be permeable', Fairer replaces these paradigms of nature with 'an infinitely various living continuity within whose terms and through whose energies humanity is able to survive' (260). He applies the eighteenth-century georgic idea of landscape, derived from Virgil, to readings of *Tintern Abbey*, *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, and *The Ruined Cottage*. The georgic is responsive to 'contingencies' and 'the endless cycle of the seasons'; it has 'at its heart [...] the motif of the [...] return' (263). Such an approach, particularly significant in understanding the 'rapid change, disorganization and uncertainty' of the 1790s, shows that the power of *The Ruined Cottage*, 'as a human document', resides in its 'sense of earth's small returns': its locating the human within the 'broader rhythms of life' (281). 'Organised around a persistent tracing and retracing'—recalling the georgic's ongoing sustaining processes of decay and growth—*The Ruined Cottage* explores 'a living history' that is neither 'mystical' nor 'transcendent'; it presents 'an image of vital growth [...] one embedded in decay and death, but somehow drawing life from "ruin and change"', and linking past with future. (282).

Coleridge's political attitudes are placed in context of a specific historical moment: one in which 'ruin and change' were immediate threats. On 20 April 1798, King George 'issued a call for the nation to organise itself and prepare for [...] imminent invasion'; warning, at the same time, against the 'wicked machinations' of 'treacherous and disaffected persons in these kingdoms', who were said to be collaborating with the enemy (285). This was a moment of crisis for those, such as the 25 year-old Coleridge, who had supported the radical cause: 'what should be directed abroad was simple; but looking homeward was more complicated' (287). Four days before King George's call to the nation, Coleridge had published in the *Morning Post* a poem entitled *The Recantation*, subsequently renamed with the 'neutral descriptive title', *France: An Ode* (PW 1 1 463). In *The Recantation*, Coleridge aligns his position with that of the *Morning Post*, negotiating patriotism and consistency of principle in a stance that is 'mixed, conditional' and pragmatic (292). While *The Recantation* is 'limited by its Pindaric character', the rhetorical qualities of which risk a compromise of 'personal integrity', *Fears in Solitude* adopts a 'local voice' which places 'a patriotic response' in the context of 'inward concerns': the local and the personal are placed 'at the service of the nation', and the image of retreat is 'daringly' used 'as a pledge of commitment' (295). Fairer reads *Fears in Solitude* alongside Bowles's *St Michael's Mount, A Poem*, 'published not long after April

1798' (301). Bowles's poem, like Coleridge's, meditates on nature's peace interrupted by 'fears of state corruption and the violence of war' (300). Bowles's physical—and metaphysical—'geography' offers a 'loftier, heavenly perspective' on the Europe of 1798, in contrast with Coleridge's local focus, speaking from 'within his private dell' (301). Fairer suggests a hitherto unnoticed connection between *Fears in Solitude* and the evolving political situation. On 20 April 1798, Richard Brinsley Sheridan made a speech in the House of Commons which was highly influential, and treated by newspapers as 'the voice of the country' (303). Sheridan's 'message' was that, at this historical moment, 'patriotism and principle' could be 'reconciled', and it was 'fear' which 'bound the two together' (304). Fairer suggests that Sheridan's parliamentary speech, with which Bowles 'explicitly' associates his 'sentiments' in *St. Michael's Mount* (302), 'was both an encouragement and a direct stimulus to Coleridge's poem'; and that, by dating *Fears in Solitude* 'April 20th, 1798', Coleridge was 'implicitly' acknowledging this connection (306). The 'local pledge' made by *Fears in Solitude* 'hinted that values and commitments were being sustained independently' in quiet and hidden places throughout 'the kingdom' (306). The poem's notion of integrity recalls Burke's view that 'to be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections': *Fears in Solitude* conceives 'a nation' held together not by a 'spurious unity, but by a network of locally-sustained values' (308).

Fairer contrasts the outlook of Coleridge the poet of 1798 with that of Coleridge the metaphysician of 1801. 'Deeply immersed in "metaphysical speculation"', Coleridge in 1801 felt himself to be 'on the brink of achieving a great synthesis' through which he would 'solve the process of Life and Consciousness' (309). By contrast, in *Frost at Midnight*, Coleridge had treated the 'process of Life and Consciousness' empirically. The poem expresses organic poetic meaning as 'a form of intricate interconnection' (310). It presents an indefinite and fluctuating subjectivity as opposed to a delineated fixed self: the poet of February 1798 expresses 'a multifaceted consciousness, one that is not searching for truth, but is capable of being surprised by meaning' (312). Coleridge, in this 'alert, ironic mode' is always 'ready to shift his position and see things from various perspectives' (312). This is a distinctive characteristic 'of the eighteenth-century Coleridge', written out by 'his own [...] theoretical analyses post-1801'; and subsequently obscured by the 'largely anachronistic vocabulary' of scholars who adopted the terminology of Coleridge's revised perspective (313). With authoritative scholarship and incisive insight, Fairer has restored to light the eighteenth-century qualities of Coleridge and his circle. Fairer's commitment to his theme underlies the book's erudition, which is carried with an engaging generosity, and genial lightness of touch; as in the gently self-deprecating good humour with which discussion of *Tintern Abbey* is 'revived again after seven long chapters' (265). The presentation of the book is of highest quality: attractively reproduced

illustrations are adduced with elegance and subtlety; while the comprehensive bibliography, and detailed yet accessible footnotes, readily invite further exploration and research. Fairer remarks that ‘there is a great deal left to say about the poems I have discussed, all of which will respond to new critical trajectories’ (313). The book’s whole thrust is to stimulate ongoing recovery of the vital literary history, the poetic contexts and texts, of the 1790s: the continuing exploration of their ‘richness of meaning’ (313).