

COLERIDGE NOW: A SURVEY

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge may not have been a man for all seasons, but he appears to be a literary figure for all scholars and teachers. I say this based on the results of a survey designed to solicit responses about the status of early nineteenth-century poets. Being all things to all scholars and teachers ensures that Coleridge is likely to survive even the most whimsical changes in critical and theoretical ideology, and that his standing is supported by enough different kinds of props that even the removal of more than two or three would not cause a collapse of his importance and reputation.

This essay will present and examine comments from the survey that are relevant to the understanding and teaching of Coleridge -- a symposium, if you will, of contemporary voices on Coleridge. Often some background and discussion has been supplied in order to contextualize the comments, as well as references to some of the influential critical work. The remarks made by respondents are indicators of how, at this point in critical and literary history, Coleridge is perceived by a broad range of university teachers; and, moreover, how teachers of Coleridge perceive how their students perceive Coleridge. The comments also suggest various approaches to the study and teaching of Coleridge, and therefore this essay offers some direction to those who, these days, feel uncomfortable or undirected in teaching or writing about Coleridge. The responses organize themselves into six subject areas: I. Coleridge and Wordsworth; II. Plagiarism; III. Opium; IV. Coleridge's prose; V. Coleridge's poetry; VI. Coleridge and Romanticism. [\[1\]](#)

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I. Coleridge and Wordsworth

More than one-third of the comments made about Coleridge's relative importance associate and/or compare him with Wordsworth. The comments are almost equally divided between three positions: 1) those who maintained that Coleridge needed Wordsworth; 2) those who believed Wordsworth needed Coleridge; and 3) those who felt they needed each other.

Some representative comments supporting the first position: "Coleridge looked to Wordsworth's greatness, and sought his own greatness therein;" "without Wordsworth around, Coleridge would have had no model to respond to or, for that matter, react against;" "most of Coleridge's best poetry is 'creative adaptation' (parody?) of Wordsworth's work;" "Wordsworth simply overshadows Coleridge." Perhaps views like these derive from Coleridge's oft-quoted bow to Wordsworth: "[Wordsworth is] the only man, to whom *at all times & in all modes of excellence* I feel myself inferior. . . ." [\[2\]](#) Perhaps too everyone recalls Coleridge's humble posturing as a "devoted child" listening and praying to his "comforter and guide" in his poem to Wordsworth (1807). A book like William Heath's *Wordsworth and Coleridge* (1970) certainly contributes to putting Coleridge in a negative or inferior light relative to Wordsworth.

Those who held that Wordsworth needed Coleridge were just as forthright: "Coleridge made Wordsworth;" "Coleridge had more to do with Wordsworth's significant mental and physical moves than anyone else;" "Coleridge is the large but largely unseen authority behind the *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Prelude* -- the motivation and inspiration;" "he gave Wordsworth direction." Stephen Gill's recent biography of Wordsworth (1989) also strongly suggests

Wordsworth's dependence on Coleridge. Some respondents took this idea even further, so that Coleridge appears as an unreciprocated sacrificer with Wordsworth as the cause of Coleridge's

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problems: "the more Coleridge pushed Wordsworth to produce that great philosophical poem [*The Recluse*], the more Wordsworth pointed to Coleridge's own failings." This was also turned around so that Coleridge appears to be the cause of Wordsworth's decline: "Coleridge's great expectations [for the completion of *The Recluse*] had a damning effect on Wordsworth's confidence."

The compromise position pointing to the mutual influence working between the two poets remains a popular and attractive view, and is probably the most realistic assessment of the complex inter-personal relationship and complicated literary inter-dependence. Many respondents noted as much, and they suggested seeing the relationship as a partnership: "Wordsworth and Coleridge -- the most important creative combo in English history, and not unlike [Paul] McCartney (as Wordsworth) and [John] Lennon (as Coleridge);" "a number of texts probably deserve dual authorship;" "Coleridge made Wordsworth think about poetry; Wordsworth made Coleridge think about criticism." Here the works of H. M. Margoliouth (*Wordsworth and Coleridge, 1795-1834*, 1953) and Stephen Prickett (*Coleridge and Wordsworth: The Poetry of Growth*, 1970) have likely had some influence. It was also noted that Coleridge is the muse for *The Prelude*: "the first and most important modern poem was thought of by and dedicated to Coleridge;" "Wordsworth would not have found the all-important tone for *The Prelude* without Coleridge's conversation poems as models."

A number of questionnaires revealed that students are often intrigued by the gossipy relationship between the two poets. Coleridge, it seems, usually evokes most of the sympathy. After all, it was Wordsworth's off-handed remark about Coleridge's disabilities made to a mutual and obviously insensitive friend (Basil Montagu) that caused Coleridge to fall away from Wordsworth. And apparently an account of his on-and-off-again relationship with Wordsworth and his never quite fulfilled love for

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Wordsworth's sister-in-law can engage the sympathetic attention of even the most apathetic class. Coleridge, then, is just that much more "Romantic" in his chequered literary career and personal life. In the case of teaching Coleridge, it seems that picturing the man is an effective strategy in accessing the texts.

II. Plagiarism

One of the most influential and controversial books on Coleridge remains Norman Fruman's *Coleridge, The Damaged Archangel* (1971). Fruman's charge -- that Coleridge's haphazard thinking is a product of his unabashed raiding of other writers, and especially F. W. Schelling, A. W. Schlegel, Immanuel Kant -- is not a new one, although his reason for Coleridge's over-reliance on the words and ideas of others, that is, Coleridge's obsessive insecurity about his own capabilities, is an attractive proposition, especially for a teacher with psycho-biographical leanings. Thus some of the more negative respondents maintained that in light of Coleridge's "borrowings" he is barely a "creative plagiarist" and simply a "plunderer of all things German." And another respondent: "He read too much, made too many notes without referencing, and apparently didn't seem to know which ideas were his and which were not. Worse yet, apparently his memory was remarkable." So it was. Whatever else, the

relative worth of Fruman's study is to be judged by the plethora of defenders who sharpened their pencils in defence of Coleridge's originality and integrity. Another respondent looked right through the issue: "Coleridge represents the first and, most important connection between English and German thought -- regardless of the plagiarism."

Two almost equal groups of Coleridgeans emerge from the survey: the idealizing sympathizers (poor Coleridge -- his syncretic mind was simply

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overwhelmed and confused by his overindulgence in ideas) and the sceptical agonizers (naughty Coleridge -- he was dishonestly making claims of originality in his covert purloining of ideas). The idealizing sympathizers seem to have inherited the sentiments of John Livingston Lowes' *The Road to Xanadu* (1927), which romanticizes Coleridge's transformational acts of genius. The key word here is "transformational", which is Lowes' way of saying that Coleridge's assimilating mind absorbed a myriad of potential sources and shaped them into something exemplary of the human creative spirit. One respondent said that "Coleridge is pure, mystical genius." This seems to echo the conclusion of Lowes' book where he mentions Coleridge's "pure imaginative vision." [3] It should, however, be noted that the idealizers who draw on Lowes' lexicon of "creative," "visionary," "spirit," and "genius" in describing Coleridge are for the most part referring to Coleridge's poetry, while the agonizers look to the fragmentary nature of the poetry and the lack of direction and pilfering in the prose. One respondent managed to capture the spirit of both sides: "Coleridge is the most extraordinary non-original thinker in English letters." A further comment can act as a bridge between this and the next section: "students are ill-at-ease with the plagiarism question, but they like the drug stuff."

III. Opium

"An account of Coleridge's life is the true confession of an English opium eater" -- so wrote one respondent. The survey indicates that even more intriguing than the problem of Coleridge's plagiarism is his drug addiction and the related issue of his mental health. If there is one item of literary gossip that non-literature majors know from high school or freshman literature courses, it is that "Kubla Khan" is purported to be the product of an interrupted opium dream -- "a sort of Reverie," wrote

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Coleridge in his too-often cited and unreliable postscript to the poem, "brought on by two grains of opium."

From early on in his life, Coleridge and those around him expected great things. But such expectations often precipitate great disappointments, and throughout his literary career Coleridge was his own worst enemy -- a failure to himself and (as far as he was concerned) to his friends. Often his solution was to take on even more commitments, as if taking on more would make the uncompleted projects go away. But go away they wouldn't -- nor could Coleridge, through an act of will, simply leave them behind. Coleridge carried the baggage of past failure (i.e. guilt) around with him, not unlike the Mariner's weighty albatross. Much of Coleridge's career can thus be seen as a circle of commitment, failure, guilt, more commitment, greater failure, deeper guilt, and so on. As a part of this circle, and undeniably making it more vicious, opium is an added ingredient, with all its distracting and debilitating physiological symptoms. Addiction research in fact shows that the prevalent psychological features of opium addiction are guilt, shame, a sense of worthlessness, and self-

criticism. [4] Coleridge's letters and some of his poetry repeatedly center on these very feelings. But it must be remembered that in Coleridge's time opium was considered a remedy for the very problems it caused.

Two comments out of many will serve here to capture the spirit and range of responses to Coleridge's drug problems: while it was said that "opium destroyed much of STC's creative life" it was also held that "Coleridge's failure had nothing to do with drugs -- it was his insecure personality." It would be misleading to present the view that the quality of Coleridge's literary production and his style of thought were a result of his opium experiences.

IV. Prose

More than half of the comments made about Coleridge's importance as a Romantic mention his literary criticism and theory: "the great critic of the age;" "he gives Romanticism its philosophical grounding . . . and inaugurated modern criticism;" "some key poems, but all-important for critical theory;" "he ranks higher as a thinker than as a poet;" "the first modern critic." In some ways we have come full circle. We now have come to judge Coleridge by the critical standards and methods that he himself initiated, standards of consistency and universality in scope, unbiasedness in attitude, and methods of intellectual honesty, detailed consideration, and critical objectivity. There were some dissenting and cautionary voices, and two comments cover the negative range: "I try to keep away from anything confusing, especially the *Biographia*;" "Coleridge's criticism seems to have made interpreters make Coleridge mean something other than what Coleridge himself intended, or meant." Coleridge's prose intimidates some teachers and many students.

The last comment cited sounds something like what George Watson once wrote about Coleridge's commentators, "that, while they have failed to agree on what Coleridge actually said, they are nearly all agreed that it was of first importance." [5] Today, as we continue to evaluate the seemingly unconnected mass of Coleridge's prose in the hope of finding some center therein, all the while arguing whether his contribution is chiefly philosophical, psychological, critical, spiritual, and so on, teachers of Coleridge might remember that his project was intended to both unite and distil these areas. While modern interpreters try to weed out, for example, "Coleridge on psychology" or "Coleridge on religion," we should keep in front of us the idea that Coleridge (especially in his dominating idealist

strain) is what could be called an all-or-nothing thinker, so that this dissection might be somewhat murderous to his attempts as a systemic or integrated thinker. Coleridge should be approached as being greater than the sum of his parts, and understanding and communicating this demands more than a gloss or a random pulling of passages. It demands that Coleridge's life project be presented as just that, and his larger aims should always be pointed out. We might be reminded that Coleridge's desire for a grand, unified theory or system was not unlike those projects initiated by philosophers of the time. But Coleridge's magnum opus remained for the most part unwritten, and perhaps unwritable. Unfortunately, as Walter Jackson Bate has pointed out, there was really no one else in Europe at the time so qualified to take on such a project. [6] There has certainly been no one since.

V. Poetry

As one respondent put it, "Coleridge's output is meagre, his poetry over-rated, and it is uneven in its quality." Although this sounds judgemental, at least two-thirds of this statement is true: Coleridge did not write very much poetry, and a substantial portion of it is not of premier quality. Whether much of it is "over-rated" is certainly arguable. The dozen or so poems that made and maintain Coleridge's reputation as a first-rate poet persist in their discursive power, and those few poems have exerted a profound influence not only on other poetry, but also on how we teach poetry in general and Romantic poetry more specifically. (In our very first term of teaching, most of us probably used some of Coleridge's poetry in Freshman courses -- and it worked. And we still use it in introductory courses because it still works. Coleridge remains exemplary for teaching such important concepts as imagination, allusion, imagery, symbol, allegory,

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irony, and tone. Moreover, definitions of many of those terms can probably be traced back to him.) One bottom line is that those dozen or so poems are eminently teachable on any level. And so said a number of the respondents: for example, "it is difficult to imagine teaching Romantic poetry without Coleridge." Yes -- it is much more likely that Blake, Keats, Shelley, or Byron will be passed or hurried over.

My own relative success in teaching Coleridge's poetry in a Romantic context has been to expose a range of dialectics in which his poetry manoeuvres, not always successfully, for balance: a dialectic of joy and guilt, acceptance and dejection, scepticism and faith, desire and restraint, idealism and irony, integration and rejection, visionary clarity and muddled emotion, insight and blindness. These too, I feel, are central to understanding English Romantic poetry, and they are most clearly and profoundly articulated by Coleridge. His poetic range should be central to explaining his central place in the canon: What can be more personal than the conversation poems, more imaginative than "Kubla Khan", and more universal than *The Ancient Mariner*?

VI. As a Romantic

"Any definition of Romanticism one can think of always seems to apply more to Coleridge than any other Romantic." Once more, Coleridge seems to be all things to all Romanticists. Similar in spirit is another comment: "All of the buzz-words for Romanticism (imagination, nature, supernatural, mystical, pantheism, idealism, irony, agony, despair, genius) fit Coleridge better than anyone else."

But he was also all things to all Romantics. And so in seeing Coleridge as a Romantic it is perhaps best to begin by considering portrayals made by his contemporaries. Those by Wordsworth and William

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Hazlitt are obvious places to begin. Or consider Thomas Love Peacock's caricature of Coleridge ("Mr. Panscope") from his 1816 novel *Headlong Hall* as "the chemical, botanical, astronomical, mathematical, metaphysical, meteorological, anatomical, physiological, galvanistical, musical, pictorial, bibliographical, critical philosopher." So too we can turn to another of his contemporaries (and progeny as well) in order to see the same ambivalence towards Coleridge that as the survey shows, still holds some sway. This is from Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third* (1819):

He was a mighty poet -- and

A subtle-souled Psychologist;
All things he seemed to understand
Of old or new -- of sea or land -
But his own mind -- which was a mist.

This was a man who might have turned
Hell into Heaven -- and so in gladness
A Heaven unto himself have earned;
But he in shadows undiscerned
Trusted, -- and damned himself to madness. (378-87)

Here is the tribute to the powerful poet; the integrated thinker; the mystic, metaphysician, and psychologist; the fallen, visionary angel (Milton's Satan); and here too is the confused mind, the failed potential, the impending mental collapse. Our contemporary idea of Coleridge still holds the same reservations and respect some 160 years later.

VII. Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from the survey suggest that the following areas and issues are most relevant for assessing Coleridge's importance, and for effectively teaching Coleridge as a Romantic:

1) The judgment of Coleridge's contemporaries remains the place to begin evaluating his qualities and accomplishments;

2) Any account of Coleridge that is more than cursory must consider the

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details of his personal and literary relationship to Wordsworth as well as his accomplishments relative to Wordsworth's;

3) While Coleridge can be credited with importing German metaphysics, his plagiarizing must be considered an unacknowledged debt and a scholarly failure;

4) His use of opium should a) be put into the context of opium usage in the 18th- and 19th-century England and b) not brought into the issue of the quality of his thought or poetry; rather, it should be considered a part of his psycho-physiological problems that sometimes get expressed in his work;

5) Coleridge's literary criticism should be related to and distinguished from that of his contemporaries, and his place in the development of the practice of criticism and literary theory should be noted;

6) Besides his influence on Wordsworth's poetry, the indebtedness of the second generation of Romantics is worth pointing out;

7) Despite the small number of worthy poems he wrote, the range and innovatory nature of his poetic style should be emphasized;

8) Coleridge's quest for the ultimate explanatory system that would account for art, science, religion, nature, and philosophy can be most profitably assessed in the context of the comparable projects initiated by German philosophers;

9) In teaching Coleridge as a Romantic, his uniqueness can be shown through his diversity; he is the Romantic archetype of the type he himself created;

10) An effort should be made to unify Coleridge the poet and Coleridge the critic.

Despite any scenario that might be constructed, Coleridge was a success, perhaps not in his personal life and in all his literary activities, but in the impact he had on his contemporaries and the influence

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he has had on following generations of poets and critics. Of all the early nineteenth-century poets, Coleridge in this survey comes across as the most visible creation and creator of his age.

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Appendix

Universities surveyed:*

USA. Alabama, Baylor, Boston, California (Los Angeles), California State (Los Angeles), Cleveland State, Colorado (Boulder), Connecticut, Delaware, Florida State, Georgia State, Harvard, Hawaii (Hilo), Hofstra, Idaho, Kansas (Lawrence), Michigan State, Minnesota, Minnesota (Duluth), Mississippi State, Nevada (Las Vegas), New Haven, Northern Iowa, North Dakota, Oklahoma State, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Portland State, Princeton, Purdue, San Diego State, San Jose State, South Dakota, Texas (Austin), Wesleyan.

CANADA. Alberta, British Columbia, Calgary, Concordia, Dalhousie, McGill, Manitoba, Memorial, Mississauga, Mount Allison, Ottawa, Prince Edward Island, Queen's, Saint Mary's, Saskatchewan, Simon Fraser, Victoria, York.

GREAT BRITAIN. Aberdeen, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Hull, Keele, Leeds, London (Birbeck), London (University College), Liverpool, Nottingham, Oxford, Salford, Sheffield, Queen's (Belfast), Wales (Aberystwyth).

"*Note that a number of universities sent more than one response, and some responses were returned without academic affiliation. I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who responded for their cooperation.

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[1] Just over one hundred questionnaires were sent to randomly-chosen universities in the U.S.A., Canada, and Great Britain. Ninety-three were returned: U.S.A., 37; Canada, 26; and Great Britain, 21; unknown affiliation, 19. (See the Appendix for a list of those universities which responded.) Not all of the ninety-three returned questionnaires commented specifically on Coleridge, and some of the respondents failed to correctly complete the survey. The number of questionnaires from which the following results are taken is eighty-four. Wordsworth is deemed to be the most important Romantic poet, receiving this ranking by 80% of the respondents. The two rankings of Blake with the greatest consensus were at the second and fourth positions, where 44% of the respondents put him in these positions (22% for each position). Keats and Shelley were ranked almost equally. Both are considered third in importance about 30% of the time. Byron, however, does not come off so well, receiving the bottom ranking of fifth and sixth a total of 80% of the time (34% gave him

fifth; 46% gave him sixth). Coleridge is considered the second most important Romantic poet after Wordsworth, receiving a ranking of second by 40% of the respondents. The survey was designed to gather relative remarks about the Big Six Romantics that express the distinguishing features of each poet. Respondents were asked to "rank" these poets in terms of their "importance to Romanticism" and to "qualify" their ranking. The respondents' comments featured in this essay are taken from these qualifications. For more complete results of this survey, see G. Kim Blank, ed., *The New Shelley: Later Twentieth-Century Views* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 242-47.

[2] E. L. Griggs, ed., *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71.), Vol. I, p.334.

[3] *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (1927; London: Pan, 1978), p. 394.

[4] S. J. Blatt, et al., "The Psychodynamics of Opiate Addiction." *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 172 (1984), pp. 342-52.

[5] George Watson, *The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism*. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962), pp. 111-12.

[6] *Coleridge* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), p. 182.

Appendix

Universities surveyed:*

USA. Alabama, Baylor, Boston, California (Los Angeles), California State (Los Angeles), Cleveland State, Colorado (Boulder), Connecticut, Delaware, Florida State, Georgia State, Harvard, Hawaii (Hilo), Hofstra, Idaho, Kansas (Lawrence), Michigan State, Minnesota, Minnesota (Duluth), Mississippi State, Nevada (Las Vegas), New Haven, Northern Iowa, North Dakota, Oklahoma State, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Portland State, Princeton, Purdue, San Diego State, San Jose State, South Dakota, Texas (Austin), Wesleyan.

CANADA. Alberta, British Columbia, Calgary, Concordia, Dalhousie, McGill, Manitoba, Memorial, Mississauga, Mount Allison, Ottawa, Prince Edward Island, Queen's, Saint Mary's, Saskatchewan, Simon Fraser, Victoria, York.

GREAT BRITAIN. Aberdeen, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Hull, Keele, Leeds, London (Birkbeck), London (University College), Liverpool, Nottingham, Oxford, Salford, Sheffield, Queen's (Belfast), Wales (Aberystwyth).

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