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Notebook writing (and Romanticism)

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Keywords

Conflict

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Abstract

Many Romantic poets and thinkers kept notebooks to jot down miscellaneous entries ranging from minute observations of natural objects, fragments of lectures or poems to records of dreams and nightmares, or metaphysical reflections. These fragmented writings open a fascinating window onto the creative mind and its ability to relate composite materials (thoughts, objects, subjective experiences, readings, encounters...) and turn them into an artwork. This entry focuses more specifically on the socializing function of the notebook and notebook writing and argues that notebooks such as those of Coleridge, Dorothy Wordsworth and Godwin are valuable records of Romantic sociable practices.

It may seem paradoxical to associate the notebook, as an object and as a form of writing, with the idea of a shared writing experience, or of a literary form that involves a process of

socialization. Since notebook writing varies greatly from one writer to the other, attempts to define the form and intention of notebook writing are scarce. Genetic criticism has endeavored to define various formal criteria:

‘S’il s’agit par exemple d’un calepin ou d’un carnet, il y a de fortes chances que son contenu soit fait de notations hybrides – choses vues, idées-éclaircs, ‘mises en mémoire’ ou simplement traces de la vie quotidienne.’¹

For 40 years, as a way of preserving memories, [Coleridge](#) wrote in his pocket-book format notebooks, often in an elliptic way, work projects, snatches of poems, thinking processes, observations, meditations, evocations. His most famous notebook recounts with great topographic accuracy his long walks and climbs in the Lake District in August 1802. When Coleridge writes about the way he envisaged the meaning and intention of his notebook writing, we read the same indeterminacy of the written form:

‘[...] the portrait and impress of the mood of the moment – birds of passages – or Bubbles’²

[...] processes of a mind working toward truth (NB 6450)’³

Gazing at the sky in November 1799 as he was on the coach to London, he describes in his pocket-book the image of a flight of starlings which strangely echoes these ‘birds of passages’:

‘Starlings in vast flights drove along like smoke, mist, or anything misty (without) volition (NB 1, 582)’

Those few comments on [Coleridge](#)’s notebook writing may convey the idea that what characterizes the flux of notebook writing is its similarity with that of the mind. Unlike the diary, the ‘I’, and its changing mood, are not the primary subjects of the notebook; rather it is the movement of thought itself, its formation and growth. If this interpretation moves us away from the occasional solipsist form of the diary, the socializing function still does not appear clearly. The notebook writer usually writes for himself, not for an audience; if the letter offers, on a literary formal level, clear evidence of a practice of sociability, this is not the case for the notebook. The letter always has an addressee and as such presupposes a conversational act; the identity of the notebook addressee is far more ambiguous and ‘ever-changing’.

However, the socializing function of the notebook becomes visible if we consider notebook writing not simply on a formal level but as a practice; it then reflects the way this object becomes central in social interactions and friendly conversations.

As Kevin Gilmartin remarks, romantic theory and criticism have taken little interest in sociability as shaping the Romantic movement. His reading of [Coleridge](#)'s 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison' in *Sociable Places: Locating Culture in Romantic-Period Britain* (2017), and his more general reading of Coleridge's conversational poems, trace this history of romantic criticism which has cast the poet as a lonely figure and the poem as an act of imagination independent from place, historical events, aesthetic experiences and social intercourses. The notebook, since it shows domestic and natural places, homes, gardens, valleys, mountains, in their concreteness, in their sensible and social reality, marks them also as spaces for sociability and active participants in the imaginative act of poetry-making.

By comparing poets' notebooks, we may read this reciprocity between the place and sociability, between sociability and writing, each acting upon the other. [Coleridge](#) and Dorothy Wordsworth wrote in their notebooks when they travelled to Germany, or walked through Scotland, or sojourned in the Lake district and at Alfoxden. Coleridge's presence is particularly remarkable in Dorothy's Alfoxden journals:

'26th [...] walked with Coleridge nearly to Stowey after dinner. A very clear afternoon. We lay sidelong upon the turf, and gazed on the landscape till it melted into more than natural loveliness. [...] Walked to the top of a high hill to see a fortification. Again sat down to feed upon the prospect.'⁴

By jotting down the shared vision or emotion, the journal keeps track of the moment of conversation which prompted it. The following fragments, taken from Dorothy's and [Coleridge](#)'s notebooks, while travelling to Rose Castle in Scotland in August 1803, translate their vision of a landscape detail; Coleridge's writing is far more elliptic than Dorothy's, which transfigures the perception of the shadows of the swallows, but both fragments testify to a common vision which also echoes the flight of starling vision and image:

'Go in, the ivy over the Coach House, belonging the same mass – the horns of the dark old mulberry Tree among it – the Swallows & their Shadows on the Castle-House walls [...] (NB 1, 1427; *we underline*)

We walked up to the house and stood some minutes watching the swallows upon the sunbright walls of the old building; the shadows glanced and twinkled, interchanged and crossed each other, expanded and shrunk up, appeared and disappeared every instant; as I observed to William and Coleridge, seeming more like living things than the birds themselves.' (Woof 2)

As suggested by Pamela Woof, it is the presence of the others – her brother William, his wife Mary Hutchinson, Tom Poole, [Coleridge](#), his wife Sara, the Cruikshanks – which is visible in Dorothy's notebooks, far more than in Coleridge's, and which weaves the pattern of her journal writing; moments of conversations, recitations of poems, shared walks and wanderings in the Quantock hills create those practices of a Romantic sociability which, in the context of the revolutionary decade, turned to the private home and the natural world:

‘Monday [6th]. A rainy day – Coleridge intending to go but did not get off. We walked after dinner to Rydal. After tea read *The Pedlar*. Determined not to print *Christabel* with the LB.’ (Woof 24)

Yet, there is a kind of reluctance, in [Coleridge](#)'s notebooks as in Dorothy's, to write explicitly about quarrels, conflicts or strained relationships within their circles of friends. The above entry mentions as an anecdote Wordsworth's decision (or Coleridge's? or both of them?) not to publish ‘*Christabel*’ in the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*; for Richard Holmes and Thomas MacFarland, this decision would have a detrimental effect upon Coleridge's career as poet. Coleridge's notebooks do not tell us more about the conversation that led to that decision, or his feelings about it. These private texts suggest conversation - ‘Different as they are, Coleridge's Notebooks and Dorothy Wordsworth's Recollections, have conversation somewhere in the background’ (Woof, *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 10) - but conjointly also a reluctance to state what casts a shadow over friendships, over the cohesion of the group.

Sociability involves friendly interaction as much as rejection or exclusion leading to the reconfiguration of circles and literary coteries, all the more since the home becomes an important component of sociability. Because notebook writing usually plays with words, forms and blank spaces on the page, we are given a glimpse of this conflictual or fluctuating sociability:

‘*Saturday 15th* [...] We had a melancholy letter from Coleridge just at Bed-time – . It distressed me very much & I resolved upon going to Keswick the next day.

ST Coleridge
Dorothy Wordsworth William Wordsworth
Mary Hutchinson Sara Hutchinson
William Coleridge Mary
Dorothy Sara
16th May
1802
John Wordsworth’ (Woof 100)

The layout of the names on the page is a means of inscribing not only the circle of friends but also the structure of the circle and the links between them according to the perception of Dorothy. At the top of this inverted pyramid, [Coleridge](#) sits on his own, or maybe between Dorothy and [William](#). Mary Hutchinson, the wife of William Wordsworth, is not next to him but opposite and beneath, close to her sister Sara Hutchinson; then we have William and Mary but separated by Coleridge forming a triad which may have reassured Dorothy. The game is infinite. Coleridge's notebooks use this same graphic, even algebraic, representation of the group:

$$\overline{\text{W+D+MW+SH+HDSC}} = \text{S T C.}$$

= Ego contemplans (NB 2, 2389)

The line above the initials figures the composition of the groups (William, Dorothy, Mary, and his children Hartley, Derwent et Sara, Sara Hutchinson alone in the center) and the algebraic sign the way those groups revolve around Coleridge. In 1801, as an echo to Dorothy's fragment, Coleridge residing at Greta Hall in Keswick alludes to his moving away from the serene and creative Dove cottage circle by not inscribing his initials:

'The spring with the little tiny cone of loose sand ever rising & sinking at the bottom, but its surface without a wrinkle. – W.W. M.H. D.W. S.H. (NB 1, 980)'

The notebooks bear witness to those sociable practices that had been relegated to the abstract notion of 'Lake school'. There is currently no digital version of [Coleridge](#)'s notebooks which would allow searching them by date, location, event or person. A digital index would be an extremely useful tool to map Romantic sociability and to visualize its evolution. Godwin's notebooks, in a radically different way, are also a window on the intense process of socialization that took place during the revolutionary period. The entries, more regularly dated and factual, kept track of the people he met, the people who visited him, the books read and those he was writing, the meals shared, the topics of conversation, the letters sent and received:

‘Write to Cooper & Parr. Coleridge calls: dine at Coleridge’s, w. Purkis; adv. Tobin & Hazlit: meet Henley: Alex Walker calls (*The Diary of William Godwin*, entry for Wordsworth, 3 January 1800)

Call on Coleridge: tea Coleridge’s, w. Wordsworth, Lamb & De Quincy: meet Hutchins. talk of Greeks & Latins, Spenser, Milton.’ (entry for De Quincey, 3 March 1808)

Those entries have been digitized and a search engine enables the tracking of connections per period, meal, reading, event or location. It maps [Godwin](#)’s sociability and thus highlights the importance of daily life, conversations and objects of sociability in the shaping of those circles and coteries of liberal thinkers and of a radical sociability in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

1. Almuth Gréville, *La mise en œuvre. Itinéraires génétiques* (Paris: CNRS éditions, coll. ‘Textes et manuscrits’, 2008), p. 56. ‘If it’s a notebook or notepad for instance, it is very likely that its content will consist of hybrid jottings – things seen, flashes of ideas, ‘mind storing’ or simply traces of daily life.’
2. Earl Leslie Griggs (ed.), *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 5, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 493.
3. Kathleen Coburn, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan, coll. ‘Bollingen Series’, 1957), note 6450. Coleridge’s fragments will be referred to by the acronym NB followed by the number of the entry in the Bollingen edition.
4. Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), p. 147.

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Further Reading

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[Alfoxden Journal \(1798\)](#)

[Grasmere Journal \(1800\)](#)