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Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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Abstract

Coleridge was writing at a time when the science of man was taken up by a variety of emerging disciplines such as anthropology, chemistry, ethics, psychology, sociology ... Coleridge kept pace with the progress of these sciences, and these fuelled his thinking about natural affections and natural sociability. However, he also increasingly worried about the effects of such classification on our understanding of human nature. This entry draws from his notebooks, marginalia, letters, poems and essays to show how his conception of social interaction was defined as much by a vast array of theories and writings as by personal experience. It emphasizes the importance of domestic affections for the formation of human character and social [sympathy](#).

Coleridge's childhood: parental love and education

The youngest in a family of ten, Coleridge was born in 1772 in Ottery St Mary in Devon. A greedy reader from a very early age, he would later fondly recall his childhood days and his propensity to find refuge in books and reveries to justify his dreamy temperament and bouts of melancholy. He had a quarrelsome relationship with his older brother Francis who enjoyed beating him up, but he was extremely fond of his sister Nancy whose kindness offset the coldness of his mother. As noted by Richard Holmes, Coleridge was a beloved and spoiled child but nonetheless relished in the role of the outcast.¹ When he was only seven, he fled home after a fight with Francis over food, and spent the night on the bank of the river Otter thinking, 'with inward & gloomy satisfaction, how miserable [his] Mother must be!' ² The incident, which would later resurface in his poetry ('The Wanderings of Cain', 'Dejection' and 'Monody on the Death of Thomas Chatterton'), throws light on Coleridge's excessive need of affection and attention that would become one of his social idiosyncrasies. Whereas his relationship with his mother was rather strenuous, his father, a vicar, gave him much tenderness and consideration: 'I read every book that came in my way without distinction – and my father was very fond of me, & used to take me on his knee, and hold long conversations with me' (CL I, 354). Young Samuel was only nine when his father died from a heart attack just after the departure of Francis for Bengal. The child was heart-broken, his sadness enhanced by his being sent off by his mother to Christ's Hospital soon after. For the poet, this early uprooting from his family environment accounted for his later '[c]hasing chance-started friendships':

'Me from the spot where first I sprang to light
Too soon transplanted, ere my soul had fix'd
Its first domestic loves; and hence through life
Chasing chance-started friendships.'³

He was allowed to return home only three or four times over a period of nine years. Although he never wrote to his mother and hardly mentioned her in his private writings, the coldness of her feelings (or at least Coleridge's perception of his mother's indifference) may explain, along with the loss of his father, his intense longing for affective relationships. The school was known for its severity, and memories of Christ's Hospital would feed his adult nightmares and poetry, but intense reading and social enjoyment also characterized his school days. There he met Charles Lamb whose recollections pictured the young man entrancing his schoolboy friends with inspired recitations of Homer, Pindar or Plotinus (Holmes 32-33).

Pantisocracy: ‘the experiment of human Perfectibility’

In 1791, in the midst of the revolutionary fervour that fired up the imagination of the young schoolboys, Coleridge lost his brother and his beloved sister Nancy. His college days at Cambridge would be a curious mix of Bacchanalian festivities - attending wine parties, flirting with women and prostitutes, and raising debts – reading, swimming and writing poetry. He befriended the Evans family and became infatuated with Mary, the sister of his school friend Tom Evans. He also met Robert Southey at that time, after an epic walking tour across Wales. Both men shared the same enthusiasm for the poetry of William Lisle Bowles and a [Rousseauesque](#) belief in the regeneration of man through nature. They enthusiastically devised a plan to set up ‘an experimental society, living in pastoral seclusion, sharing property, labour, and self-government equally among all its adult members, both men and women’ (Holmes 62). He would later reflect on the Pantisocracy scheme as an effect of the revolutionary exaltation, yet presenting it as having ‘an orbit of its own’, his hopes put in friendship, nature and the abolition of property, rather than in what governments and nations could accomplish:

‘[...] I hoped from Religion and a small Company of chosen Individuals, and formed a plan, as harmless as it was extravagant, of trying the experiment of human Perfectibility on the banks of *Susquahannah*; where our little Society, in its second Generation, was to have combined the innocence of the patriarchal Age with the knowledge and genuine refinements of European culture.’⁴

The plan was abandoned and in its stead, Coleridge married Sara Fricker, whom he had met through Robert Southey. Coleridge would nonetheless continue to cherish the values and ideals of sociability that had informed the Pantisocracy scheme and used them as poetic material for his conversation poems: a feeling of communal love galvanised by an exquisite sensibility to nature’s sounds and motions:

‘O! the one Life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere—
Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so filled;
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
Is Music slumbering on her instrument.’ (‘The Eolian Harp’, PW I, 218)

‘The Eolian Harp’ composed at the time he was courting Sara Fricker reveals the deeply religious impulse which underlay his reformist social aspirations. Coleridge did not adhere to Tom Paine’s or [William Godwin](#)’s radical principles of political justice and cosmopolitanism. Religious faith was and would remain fundamental for Coleridge’s idea of social amelioration.

The Bristol lectures: on consumerism and selfishness

In the fiery days of his lecturing in Bristol, he befriended a number of writers and editors - Tom Poole, Joseph Cottle, Josiah Wade, the Morgans among many other – and met, at the town house of John Pinney, a rich Bristol sugar merchant who enjoyed entertaining literary parties, [William Wordsworth](#). Coleridge had by then fallen out with Robert Southey, and had settled with Sarah at Nether Stowey, in a cottage not far from Tom Poole’s place. Coleridge’s 1795 Bristol lectures were much concerned with social inequalities and the dehumanizing effects of factory work and extreme poverty:

‘[...] those institutions of society which should condemn me to the necessity of twelve hours daily toil, would make my *soul* a slave, and sink *the rational* being in the mere animal. It is a mockery of our fellow creatures’ wrongs to call them equal in rights, when by the bitter compulsion of their wants we make them inferior to us all in all that can soften the heart, or dignify the understanding.

Domestic affections depend on association. We love an object if, as often as we see or recollect it, an agreeable sensation arises in our minds. But alas! How should *he* glow with the charities of Father and Husband, who gaining scarcely more, than his own necessities demand, must have been accustomed to regard his wife and children, not as the Soothers of finished labour, but as Rivals for the insufficient meal!’⁵

Coleridge would relentlessly denounce the pitfalls of [Adam Smith](#)’s economic theory which turned men into things, mere mechanisms for the production system, thus impeding the formation and development of domestic affections. Coleridge was appalled by the selfishness which characterized human relationships: the exploitation of workers and children for factory production, that of women through marriage, of slaves through the plantation system, of children through consumerism. As the nation was writing itself at the dawn of the eighteenth century, he insisted, in his Bristol public lectures, on the need of nurturing a genuine feeling of benevolence through parenting, education and more generally social life. How indeed could the public sympathize with the plight of slaves if they were engrossed in selfish pursuits or blinded by mawkish sensibility?

‘True Benevolence is the only possible Basis of Patriotism, and I am afraid, that what with sensuality and Vanity, and yet more disgusting Pride – true Benevolence is a rare Quality among us. Sensibility indeed we have to spare – what novel-reading Lady does not overflow with it to the great annoyance of her Friends and Family – Her own sorrows like the Princes of Hell in Milton’s Pandemonium sit enthroned bulk and vast – while the miseries of our fellow creatures dwindle with into pigmy forms, and are crowded, an unnumbered multitude, into some dark corner of the Heart where the eye of sensibility gleams faintly on them at long Intervals.’⁶

Furthermore, he firmly condemned the ‘fetishism’ of the time which made people value things over persons. As forcefully as [Rousseau](#) before him, he lambasted the dictates of fashion and the effects of middle-class consumerism on social ties and natural affections. From an early age, upper-class and upper middle-class children were stimulated through material rewards and the accumulation of goods instead of being taught to value family and community ties. In his *Opus Maximum*, he used a psycho-philosophical approach to analyse the impact of an excessive attachment to objects, breeding selfishness and narcissism and further weakening social ties:

‘[I]t is the dream of [sensual gratifications], which have obtained a spell like power over powers, aspirations, and impulses disproportionate [and] heterogeneous that sets his whole life in motion. Unnatural usurpers of the imagination, not the things, but the image of the things, no longer his mere objects become his Gods [...]. He must become the victim of those powers beyond self which he has alienated and estranged from their rightful objects. [...] [H]e becomes loveless as the fish, merciless as the snake that kills by poison, and cruel as the tiger that indulges its lust of destruction ere yet he appeases his thirst and hunger.’⁷

Invested with powers and having almost, in the eye of the beholder, an agency of their own, the ‘fetishized’ objects fostered an unhealthy attachment to commodities and the cultivation of animal feelings alone, further estranging man from his moral self. Although Coleridge valued the idea of progress through arts and sciences, he also saw the perverse effects of an economic system that privileged material progress to the expense of social and moral betterment:

‘Alas! we need not travel to the coasts of Africa for Feticsh worshippers- I had been almost tempted to say that the whole constitution of civilized

Europe presents the same idolatry and for the greater part in less imaginative forms. It is the dire epidemic of man in the social state to forget the substance in the appearance, the essence in the form. Hence almost every where we behold religion degraded into ceremonies, and then by the reaction before described the ceremonies animated into a strange and unnatural magic. Hence for state-policy we have state-craft and the mockery of expedience; for the fine arts a marketable trade; for philosophy a jargon of materialism, and the study of nature conducted on such principles as to place it in doubtful rivalry with the art & theory of cooking.’ (Taylor 216)

[/node/480](#) Domestic affections, friendship and collaboration

From ‘The Eolian Harp’ to ‘Opus Maximum’, Coleridge would remain consistent in the belief that social sympathy, and more generally humanity, was first nurtured through parental love. The child’s mother should be a selfless, loving, and protecting presence for the child, teaching him ‘reverence of the Invisible’ through her prayers. Man becomes a benevolent creature (‘man is made tender by the presence of a love that has no self’) as his heart is infused with the spiritual faculty of imagination. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge defined the secondary imagination as creative, but the primary imagination, deemed by some critics as superior, is a perceptual faculty, the faculty by which we perceive what transcends our selves: ‘the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception [...] a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’ (BL I, 304).

‘As sure as ever the heart of man is made tender by the presence of a love that has no self, by a joy in the protection of the helpless which is at once impulse, motive, and reward, so surely is it elevated to the universal Parent. The child on the knee of its mother, and gazing upward to her countenance marks her eyes averted heavenward, while yet it feels the tender pressure of her embrace, and learns to pray in the mother’s prayers and knows this alone, that they mean love and protection [...]. The reverence of the Invisible, substantiated by the feeling of love - this, which is the essence and proper definition of religion, is the commencement of the intellectual life, of the humanity. If ye love not your earthly parent, how can ye love your father in heaven?’ (McFarland 126-127)

Coleridge thus adopted a Burkean vision of the importance of domestic affections for the formation of society. Like Burke, Coleridge believed that familial affections set the foundations of man’s love to his nation, and to humanity at large: ‘We begin our public affections in our families. No cold relation is a zealous citizen. We pass on to our neighbourhoods, and our habitual provincial connections. These are inns and resting places’.⁸ Coleridge was deeply aware of the potential disastrous consequences of a flawed education,

unfair child punishments, or parental coldness for the construction of the social individual. He would jot down his own states of anxiety, feelings of dread, or nightmares in his [notebooks](#) so as to trace their origins to specific periods of his life:

‘It is a most instructive part of my Life [,] the fact, that I have been always preyed on by some Dread, and perhaps all my faulty actions have been the consequence of some Dread or other on my mind.’⁹

His alienation from his friends, Robert Southey in the mid-1790s, then the Wordsworths¹⁰ after his return from Malta in 1807, and his separation from his wife in 1808 would tragically intensify the dread that his notebook writing tried to analyse and control.

From the beginning, Coleridge and Sara Fricker were a curious match. She was quick-tempered but at the time he proposed to her, they were still caught up in the Pantisocratic mood. Most of the conversation poems were written during a period of domestic serenity when Coleridge was residing in Nether Stowey in the late 1790s (1795-1798) and enjoying the company and conversations of Dorothy and [William Wordsworth](#), Charles Lamb, Charles Lloyd and Tom Poole among others.

The poets, spouses and relatives formed a tight-knit literary coterie, walking through the West Country, reading and composing poetry. Dorothy’s [Alfoxden Journal](#) gives up glimpses of these moments of shared experience:

‘26th. Coleridge came in the morning, and Mr and Mrs Cruikshank; 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; a magnificent scene, *curiously* spread out for even minute inspection, though so extensive that the mind is afraid to calculate its bounds.’¹¹

The passage suggests a poetic and aesthetic conversation between Coleridge and Dorothy as they are gazing at the landscape. This type of shared vision would resurface in Dorothy’s journals and Coleridge’s [notebooks](#) as they travelled together to Germany in September 1798, and Scotland in August 1803. His wife, Sarah, though stood on the margins of Coleridge’s coterie, and his relationship to his wife became increasingly strained.

Coleridge viewed marriage ‘as essential to the growth & preservation & progressive perfection of the Man’ (Taylor 156), the love between spouses at the centre of a series of concentric circles gradually expanding to friends, acquaintances and more distant connections: ‘Reciprocal & Exclusive Love the undoubted Source of Marriage, domestic

Charities, thence of Society, of all that secures, softens, ornaments, elevates, disanimalizes, coelesctializes the human Being' (CN III 3729). His long periods of absence, especially when he left for Germany with the [Wordsworths](#) in 1798 and returned 11 months later leaving Sarah to deal with the loss of their baby Berkeley and her grief on her own, would intensify resentment felt on both sides. Coleridge's letters to his wife, written at the time he fell in love with Sarah Hutchinson and composed 'Dejection: an Ode', exacerbated their differences, making their reconciliation an arduous task. As Coleridge set to show how they valued very different types of sociability, he detailed the form of social interaction he treasured in contradistinction to Sarah's attention to appearances and 'gentlemanly manners':

'I love warm Rooms, comfortable fires, & food, books, natural scenery, music, &c; but I do not care what *binding* the Books have, whether they are dusty or clean - & I *dislike* fine furniture, handsome cloathes & all the ordinary symbols & appendages of artificial superiority – or what is called, *Gentility*. In the same spirit, I dislike, at least I seldom like, Gentlemen, gentlemanly manners, &c. [...] As I seem to exist, as it were, almost wholly within myself, in *thoughts* rather than in *things*, [...] & with *persons without* me by no ambition of their esteem, or of having rank & consequence in their minds, but with people in general by general kindness of feeling, & with me especial friends, by an intense delight in fellow-feeling, by an intense perception of the Necessity of LIKE to LIKE; so you on the contrary exist almost wholly in the world *without* you / the Eye & the Ear are your great organs, and you depend upon the eyes & ears or others for a great part of your pleasures.' (CL II, 881)

The Sage of Highgate

Coleridge would live the last 17 years of his life in Highgate, first at Moreton House then at the Grove, with James and Ann Gillman who watched him over with zeal and tenderness. At last, he had a place to call home. Coleridge rapidly became a literary attraction, welcoming visitors on Thursday afternoons and mesmerizing them with long monologues on abstruse metaphysics. Wordsworth visited him with Samuel Rogers who later admitted that both had been extremely impressed with Coleridge's discourse on Kantian philosophy yet had not understood 'a syllable from one end of his monologue to the other'.¹²

In the 1820s, Coleridge also befriended Joseph Henry Green, a surgeon who, like James Gillman, tried to alleviate his pains and control his opium addiction. Both Gillman and Green saw Coleridge as a kind of philosophical mentor. From 1824 to 1828, Green gave a series of lectures on comparative anatomy as Hunterian Professor at the Royal College of Surgeons in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. Coleridge collaborated with Green for the drafting of some of these lectures which dealt with the animal sub-kingdoms. Coleridge had been pondering over the writings of German Naturphilosophers and anthropologists since the 1810s and had

written a *Theory of Life* that was published only after his death in 1848 by Seth B. Watson. Drawing heavily on Schelling's and Steffens's system of classification of organisms, Coleridge attempted to theorize, using analogy, the similarities between the organisational system of the animal world and human society. In a fragment entitled "'Solitary" and "Gregarious"', co-written with Green, Coleridge took a particular interest in the modes of aggregation of cluster animals. Moving up the ascending scale, the animals within a cluster or a shoal become increasingly 'independent, and the master of [their] own motions' yet retaining a connection with the other organisms or individuals of the group.¹³ Man's sociality – what binds man to the social group – could thus be understood as 'an invisible copula', an inclination almost instinctive to be observed also in the animal world:

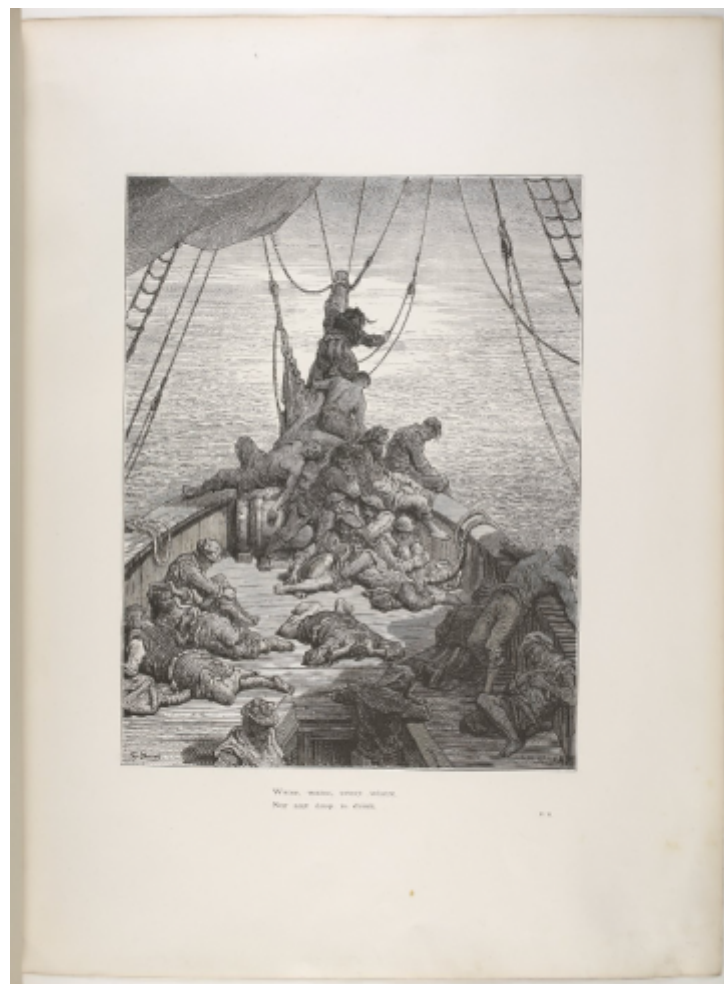
'Each member of the human cluster is an entire integer in himself, and master of its own movements – and we must therefore add the next higher state, that in which the already detached individuals are still connected by an invisible copula – and I need only mention the needs, affection and associations of domestic Man, with all the causes that render families permanent. [...] Now under favorable circumstances, the natural increase of an animal, like man, too powerful to have that increase materially impeded by other animals or even by the agencies of nature, & at the same time by the domestic & social instincts, affections & necessities kept together [...] the means of retaining his independence notwithstanding the preceding counter-powers – and this can only be found in [his] *reason*' (Jackson 1393-1394)

What fascinated Coleridge though was the tension at work between sociality and individuality, the latter not to be sacrificed to 'social instincts, affections & necessities'. Coleridge would grow increasingly uneasy with man's dependence upon 'circumstances', the word to be understood in a general sense as referring to man's physical and social environment. For Coleridge, man was the only creature gifted with a moral will and so 'ever greater than Circumstances' (Taylor 11). His later writings would reflect on the necessity to see one's self as entangled in a 'Skein of necessities' (family loyalty, education, friendship, patriotism, climate, character of country ...) that 'ring-fenced' the development of the self and individuality:

'Beyond this ring-fence he cannot stray, of these circummurations he can seldom overleap the lowest & innermost, and the outermost is his apparent horizon, & insurmountable – from this Skein of necessities he cannot disentangle himself, which surrounds with subtlest intertwine the slenderest fibres of his Being [...] the conspiracy of influences is no mere outward nor contingent Thing, that rather this necessity *is* himself [...] What then remains! O the noblest of all – to know that so it is, and in the warm & genial Light of this knowledge to beget each in himself a new man.' (CN III, 4109)

Yet, instead of seeing them as ‘outward’ things, man should reflect upon these influences as being part of himself, as constituting his human nature. As such, knowing one’s social and natural environment and their powers over the self, man could then become fully aware of the potential positive or negative effects of circumstances, and affect them to change his own nature, ‘to beget each in himself a new man.’ Although these reflections would be more fully developed in his later theoretical works, they haunt his early poetry, and Romanticism at large. ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ suggests most forcefully the consequences of man’s thoughtless and impulsive acts on his environment, the old mariner having to witness social and natural disintegration, and his own dissolution, after killing the albatross.

Image



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Legend

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Rime of the ancient mariner, illustrated by Gustave Doré (London: Doré Gallery, 1876). BnF Gallica.

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 4. S.T. Coleridge, *The Friend ; A Series of Essays* (London: Gale and Curtis, 1812), p. 161.
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 10. For the importance of collaborative friendship, esp. with Wordsworth, in Coleridge's process of creation, see for instance Marc Porée & Denis Bonnecase, *Lyrical Ballads. La difference en partage* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, collection CNED, 2011) and Adam Sisman, *The Friendship : Wordsworth & Coleridge* (New-York: Viking, 2007).
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[Alfoxden Journal \(1798\)](#)

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