



1979

Coleridge, the Reader: Language in a Combustible Mind

Timothy Corrigan

University of Pennsylvania, tcorriga@upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/cims_papers

 Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Corrigan, Timothy, "Coleridge, the Reader: Language in a Combustible Mind" (1979). *Departmental Papers (CIMS)*. 3.
http://repository.upenn.edu/cims_papers/3

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/cims_papers/3
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Coleridge, the Reader: Language in a Combustible Mind

Abstract

That Coleridge's famous annotations often contain some of his most penetrating critical insights, and often the seminal fragments of his more polished criticism, indicates, moreover, that this workshop is--at least for Coleridge-- the workshop of his best literary criticism. As part of this workshop process, he suggests three distinguishable but not divisible steps (to use his own terms): reading, understanding, and an accurate and functional use of language. The matrix of the three is language; and, for Coleridge, not only how a reader uses language but what language he uses determines, to a great extent, the quality of his reading. More than one hundred and fifty years before the structuralists and Philippe Sollers' announcement that "the essential question today is no longer that of the *writer* and the *work* ... but that of *writing* and *reading*," Coleridge had noted and was attempting to describe the complicated relationship between reading, language, and the critical understanding.

Disciplines

Film and Media Studies | Reading and Language

Coleridge, the Reader: Language in a Combustible Mind

TIMOTHY J. CORRIGAN

But how are we to guard against the herd of promiscuous Readers? . . . the event lies with the Reader.

—Rudolf von Langen

In reading we must become aware of what we write unconsciously in our reading.

—Phillipe Sollers, *Logiques*

Scattered throughout Coleridge's notes and essays is an oblique but relentless fight with a "much-reading, but not very hard-reading age." More specifically, he attacks a large group of not-so-gentle readers whose lazy and careless methods spawn so much mindless literary criticism and whose failure to react to literature with sensitivity and imagination creates not only an ebb in the quality of literary criticism but in the quality of the entire culture as well. The above quotation from Rudolf von Langen, for instance, begins an early essay in *The Friend*, "On the Communication of Truth," and the passage goes on to illustrate what a powerful part the reader plays in determining the meaning of a text, and, furthermore, how easily he misuses that power. Von Langen continues,

I purchased lately Cicero's work, *de officiis*, which I had always considered as almost worthy a Christian. To my surprize it had become a most flagrant libel. Nay! but how?—Some one, I know not who, out of the fruitfulness of his own malignity had filled all the margins and other blank spaces with annotations—a true *superfoetation of examples*, that is, of false and slanderous tales! In like manner, the slave of impure desires will turn the pages of Cato, not to say, Scripture itself, into occasions and excitements of wanton imaginations. There is no wind but feeds a volcano, no work but feeds and fans a combustible mind.²

For von Langen and Coleridge, these obscene and wrongheaded annotations are the best and most direct evidence of bad reading, and, for Coleridge, they are particularly significant because they so dramatically bring into focus that middle area between reading and criticism. That is, the margins of the text where the reader annotates are literally the workshop in which the reading of a text becomes an understanding of that text through the use of words; analogously, these textual margins are the margins of the reader's mind where the mind confronts inscriptions and signs and makes meaning out of these signs. That Coleridge's famous annotations often contain some of his most penetrating critical insights, and often the seminal fragments of his more polished criticism, indicates, moreover, that this workshop is—at least for Coleridge—the workshop of his best literary criticism. As part of this workshop process, he suggests three distinguishable but not divisible steps (to use his own terms): reading, understanding, and an accurate and functional use of language. The matrix of the three is language; and, for Coleridge, not only how a reader uses language but what language he uses determines, to a great extent, the quality of his reading. More than one hundred and fifty years before the structuralists and Philippe Sollers' announcement that “the essential question today is no longer that of the *writer* and the *work* . . . but that of *writing* and *reading*,” Coleridge had noted and was attempting to describe the complicated relationship between reading, language, and the critical understanding.¹

Coleridge made it very clear that reading is itself a skill, and that varying levels of competence are the primary reason for different kinds of readers. Accordingly readers could be divided into four classes:

1. Sponges who absorb all they read, and return it nearly in the same state, only a little dirtied.
2. Sand-glasses, who retain nothing, are content to get through a book for the sake of getting through time.
3. Strain-bags, who return merely the dregs of what they read.
4. Mogul diamonds, equally rare and valuable, who profit by what they read, and enable others to profit by it also.²

In order to differentiate the first three categories from the serious readers, the mogul diamonds, Coleridge claims “We should . . . transfer this species of *amusement* . . . from the genus, *reading*, to that comprehensive class characterized by the power of reconciling the two contrary yet co-existing propensities of human nature, namely indulgence of sloth, and hatred of vacancy.” With tongue-in-cheek he equates this kind of reading with

“gaming, swinging, or swaying on a chair or gate; spitting over a bridge; smoking; snuff-taking; tête-à-tête after dinner between husband and wife; conning word by word all the advertisements of a daily newspaper in a public house on a rainy day, &c. &c.” Yet if he does dismiss a large number of readers, Coleridge also appreciates finer distinctions in reading and the quality of reading. Writing about the reception of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* he describes many readers who could have understood and enjoyed the poems on different planes, had vindictive critics not prejudiced them (*BL*, I, 51). And, reflecting on his own reading experience, Coleridge notices how the intelligibility of Plato alters with his own experience. He recollects “that numerous passages in this author, which I thoroughly comprehend, were formerly no less unintelligible, than the passages now in question” (*BL*, I, 161). In short, the comprehension and subsequent enjoyment of a text varies not only between readers but within a single reader’s own lifetime.

The chief reason for these varying levels of competence can be found in Coleridge’s distinction between attending and thinking. In one of his introductory essays to *The Friend*, Coleridge demands

THOUGHT sometimes, and *ATTENTION* generally. By *THOUGHT* I here mean the voluntary production in our minds of those states of consciousness, to which, as to his fundamental facts, the Writer has referred us: while *ATTENTION* has for its object the order and connection of Thoughts and Images, each of which is in itself already and familiarly known. Thus the elements of Geometry require attention only; but the analysis of our primary faculties, and the investigation of all the absolute grounds of Religion and Morals, are impossible without energies of Thought in addition to the effort of Attention. . . . both Attention and Thought are Efforts, and the latter a most difficult and laborious Effort. (*F*, I, 16-17)

Sponges and sand-glasses merely attend to words on a page without ever becoming actively involved in the production of meaning, while mogul diamonds and other good readers confront and think actively with the text. Here Coleridge’s position at least partially resembles Wolfgang Iser’s notion of a “virtual dimension” of a text which “is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination.”⁶ In this virtual dimension the reader works through the gaps and blocks that are literally and metaphorically a part of every reading experience. For both Iser and Coleridge, a text can resist, and understanding will require effort. In Coleridge’s words,

A lazy half attention amounts to a mental yawn. Where then a subject, that demands thought, has been thoughtfully treated, and with an exact and patient derivation from its principles, we must be willing to exert a portion of the same effort, and to *think* with the author, or the author will have thought in vain for us. It makes little difference for the time being, whether there be an *hiatus oscitans* [yawning gap] in the reader’s attention, or an *hiatus lacrymabilis* [lamentable gap] in the author’s manuscript. (*F*, I, 25)

Reading should always involve the double activity of attending and thinking, an activity that Owen Barfield describes as “a polarity between understanding and understanding, a tension within the understanding itself.”⁷ Good reading, however, must stress the active side of this tension, where active thinking produces active understanding. In 1800, ideas supporting passive thinking and understanding, the philosophy of Hume and the psychology of David Hartley, were intellectual currency; and perhaps Coleridge’s most notable contribution to modern psychology is this new emphasis on the active role of the mind in the process of understanding. To understand, especially to understand a poem, the mind must be actively engaged, and active understanding is perhaps the most crucial step on the road to criticism.

A common tendency of readers of Coleridge is to regard the understanding as a secondary and essentially negative faculty, a notion Coleridge seems to support when he remarks that this “mere *reflective* faculty partook of death” (*BL*, I, 144). Compared to reason, the primary moral faculty in man, understanding is indeed a derivative and secondary intelligence. But the understanding, as Barfield clarifies, plays a positive role too: “Through understanding we experience the culmination of our detachment; through imagination and the gift of reason we realize, in polarity, that very culmination as the possibility of a different and higher order of attachment.”⁸ In his *Theory of Life* Coleridge explains that the simultaneous experience of detachment from a material reality and of attachment to a higher reality marks the pinnacle of human consciousness; and in this context it is clear that the lifeless detachment associated with the understanding is not simply a negative state but part of a dialectical process of which understanding is an integral part. (In one sense, this is the dialectical journey that the Ancient Mariner experiences.) Ideally, understanding and reason are part of a single process in which one can distinguish their roles without dividing them. (“It is a dull and obtuse mind that must divide in order to distinguish; but it is a still worse, that distinguishes in order to divide.”)⁹ “But if we are obliged to distinguish,” Coleridge writes in *The Statesman’s Manual*,

we must *ideally* separate. In this sense . . . Reason is the knowledge of the laws of the WHOLE considered as ONE: and as such it is contradistinguished from the Understanding, which concerns itself exclusively with the quantities, qualities, and relations of particulars in time and space. The UNDERSTANDING, therefore, is the science of phaenomena, and their subsumption under distinct kinds and sorts. . . . Its functions supply the rules and constitute the possibility of *Experience*.¹⁰

Reason is “the power by which we become possessed of principle” and spiritual absolutes. Understanding is “the faculty of thinking and forming *judgements*” (*F*, I, 177n) and as such is the domain of reading and criticism.

Like fancy, the understanding is inherently limited in being tied to the realm of the senses. But, just as fancy provides the concrete details which allow the imagination to show itself in a poem, the limitations of understanding can become a power and virtue when employed in literary criticism. For, though our understanding and criticism of a poem can never embrace the total experience of a poem, this experience would remain inconsequential without the aid of the understanding. A poem reaches into the realm of reason through the power of the imagination; and a reader retrieves and communicates that experience through, first, his imagination and, secondly, his understanding. Coleridge writes that "Understanding and Experience may exist without Reason. But Reason cannot exist without Understanding" (*F*, I, 156). Here poetic vision may be substituted for reason to emphasize the role of understanding in bringing the poetic vision to life; while at the same time understanding and good criticism should always reveal themselves as the organ of reason. What is present but incommunicable in the poem "becomes, when present to the understanding, the awakener. It begins the awakening process in all men, but it can only bring it to completion when it has been discerned and, in being discerned becomes aware of itself as reason."¹¹ In a marginal note on Jacob Boehme, Coleridge puts this another way by distinguishing "the mode of acquiring and the mode of communicating" knowledge: the first is "Intuition, or immediate Beholding," while the second is the art of understanding "by acts of abstraction, which separate from the first are indeed mere shadows, but like shadows, of incalculable service in determining the remarkable outlines of the Substance."¹² Understanding the poem is not the experience of the poem, no more than the communicative act of good criticism is the poem. Coleridge comments on Milton's description of Death in Book Three of *Paradise Lost*: "The grandest efforts of poetry are where the imagination is called forth, not to produce a distinct form, but a strong working of the mind, still offering what is still repelled, and again creating what is again rejected; the result being what the poet wishes to impress, namely the substitution of a sublime feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image."¹³ Incapable of reproducing this "sublime feeling of the unimaginable," understanding and criticism are yet informed by this vision and should serve to make the critic and the reader of the critic more conscious of it.

Coleridge probably never described this process more succinctly than in his poetic response to Wordsworth's *Prelude*, a response at once emotional, physical, and almost ineffable. The pulses of his being "beat anew," and

Life's joy rekindling roused a throng of pain—
Keen pangs of Love, awakening as a babe
Turbulent, with an outcry in the heart.

His attempt to comprehend Wordsworth's poem—to understand and not simply appreciate the vision—threatens to collapse, as the experience always seems just beyond the grasp of the understanding, particularly in Coleridge's last lines:

Scarce conscious, and yet conscious of its close
I sate, my being blended in one thought
(Thought was it? or aspiration? or resolve?)
Absorbed yet hanging still upon the sound—¹¹

The tension in these lines is between Coleridge's transcending intuition of *The Prelude* and what can be assimilated by his "understanding mind," the tension in all criticism. Of course in writing this poem Coleridge is not writing criticism; but he is indeed reconstructing the experience out of which criticism springs, that is, the dynamics of critical response whereby the reader's understanding struggles to make the ineffable in a poem comprehensible. The critical "understanding is in all respects a medial and mediate faculty,"¹⁵ and here it struggles to mediate between Wordsworth's spiritual vision and the sensible forms with which Coleridge could make meaning of that vision. Wordsworth's theme is indeed "hard as high," high in its visionary reach and hard in its resistance to the tools of the understanding, specifically language: somewhat paradoxically, the poetic language of *The Prelude* contains "thoughts all too deep for words," and the dilemma of finding a *different* language to capture the nearly unspeakable experience of the poem is the principal problem here and in all acts of critical understanding. When the language the reader-critic must substitute is discursive, moreover, the difficulties are even greater, if for no other reason than that the reader must translate from one medium to another, from poetry to prose. And, in Coleridge's wide-ranging criticism, the difficulties are compounded further by the fact that there are many prose languages he might use, such as the language of science or the language of theology.

Coleridge looks once more at this problem of the role of language in the process of understanding a text in a long provocative note in Southey's *Life of Wesley*. This time he is writing about his own readers and readers of prose, not poetry; the emphasis, however, is still on the active participation of the reader in the construction of meaning. Years before this note, Coleridge recalls, he announced in *The Friend* that he desired "not so much to shew my Reader this or that fact, as to kindle his own touch for

him, and leave it to himself to chuse the particular objects, which he might wish to examine by its light" (*F*, I, 16). In *The Friend* and the *Aids to Reflection*

the aim of every sentence is to solicit, nay *tease* the reader to ask himself, whether he *actually* does, or does not understand *distinctly*?—whether he has reflected on the precise meaning of the word, however familiar it may be both to his own ear and mouth?—whether he has been hitherto aware of the mischief and folly of employing words on questions, to know the truth of which is both his interest and his duty, without fixing the one meaning which on that question they are to represent? . . . In short, I would fain bring the cause I am pleading to a short and simple, yet decisive test. Consciousness . . . , mind, life, will, body, organ—machine, nature, spirit, sin, habit, sense, understanding, reason: here are fourteen words. Have you ever reflectively and quietly asked yourself the meaning of anyone of these, and tasked yourself to return the answer in *distinct* terms, not applicable to any one of the other words? Or have you contented yourself with the vague floating meaning that will just serve to save you from absurdity in the use of the word, just as the clown's botany would do, who knew that potatoes are roots, and cabbages green? Or, if you have the gift of wit, shelter yourself under Augustine's equivocation, "I know it perfectly well till I am asked?" Know? Ay, as an oyster knows its life. But do you know your knowledge?"

Coleridge's point in this passage is explicit: a text demands understanding, teases a reader for meaning; and the reader must make this meaning with language. Each word, sentence, and paragraph asks to be understood; and the reader must "return the answer in *distinct* terms." Hence, in one form—and certainly as regards reading, understanding is a product of language. According to Coleridge, all living creatures have the faculty of understanding, but only man, who possesses reason, can claim human understanding whose proper function is "that of generalizing the notices received from the senses in order to the construction of names."¹⁷ Animals can generalize but, because they lack reason, cannot abstract; and without the power to abstract there can be no language:

If the power of conveying information by intelligible signs, visual or auditory, would constitute the possession of Language, Language is common to many and various animals; but if we use the word, Language in its only proper sense as the power of conveying not things only but the process and result of our reflection thereon it is predicable of the Human Species alone.¹⁸

In his chapter on Coleridge's understanding Barfield puts this point concisely: "what renders understanding human is precisely this ability to identify by naming. . . . No abstraction, no language." The human understanding "is not only concerned with names; it is *only* concerned with names."¹⁹ "In all instances," Coleridge claims, "it is words, names, or, if images, yet images used as words or names, that are the only and exclusive subject of understanding."²⁰

The understanding of a text depends, therefore, on language to the extent that a language system is the most sophisticated way of assigning meaning. To understand a work like *The Friend* requires penetration into

the exact meaning of words, which requires, in turn, finding “distinct terms” to capture that meaning. With poetic works like *The Prelude* the difficulties are even greater, since the reader is dealing with a non-discursive language, poetry, and so must attempt to translate non-discursive meaning into a discursive language. Even where the reader’s language is non-discursive, in “To William Wordsworth” for instance, the strain is obvious. In each case, it is language that fashions meaning and leads the way to understanding; and it is natural that Coleridge thought and wrote a good deal about the finer points of language. These points deserve some elucidation.

Though George Steiner suggests that Coleridge, along with Plato, Vico, Humboldt, Saussure, and Jakobson, is one of the few writers “who have said anything new and comprehensive” about language,²¹ surprisingly few critics have examined Coleridge’s remarks on language, except to note his fascination with neologisms and precise meanings.²² There remains much, therefore, to be done in this area, especially since the eighteenth century and first part of the nineteenth century were periods of accelerating research and writing in the philosophy of language, and Coleridge was, as in all intellectual activity, extremely interested in this work. Leibniz, Hamann, Herder, Sir William Jones, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Schlegel all wrote extensively about the nature of language and Coleridge was clearly stimulated by their studies. In a letter to William Godwin in 1800, Coleridge went so far as to propose a book on language:

... a book on the power of words, and the processes by which human feelings form affinities with them—in short, I wish you to *philosophize* Horn Tooke’s System, and to solve the great Questions—whether there be reason to hold, that an action bearing all the *semblance* of predesigning Consciousness may yet be simply organic, & whether a *series* of such actions are possible—and close on the heels of this question would follow the old ‘Is Logic the Essence of Thinking?’ in other words—Is *thinking* impossible without arbitrary signs? &—how far is the word ‘arbitrary’ a misnomer?²³

Neither Godwin nor Coleridge wrote this book, of course, but tentative and partial answers to the questions he raises here are scattered throughout his published and unpublished writings. Nearly a century before Saussure, Coleridge was attempting to break down the relation between words as signs, things, and thought, and then to reconstruct those relations into a coherent and functional philosophy of language.

Above all else, Coleridge militantly campaigns for linguistic precision:

When two distinct meanings are confounded under one or more words, (and such must be the case, as sure as our knowledge is progressive and of course imperfect) erroneous consequences will be drawn, and what is true in one sense of the word will be affirmed in toto. Men of research, startled by the consequences, seek in the things themselves (whether in or out of the mind) for a knowledge of the fact, and having discovered the difference, remove the equivocations either by the substitution of a new word, or by the appropriation of one of the two or more words, that had before been used promiscuously. (*BL*, I, 63n)

Perhaps the foremost neologist of the nineteenth century, Coleridge never misses an opportunity to resurrect an archaic expression or fabricate a new word in order to facilitate clear thought. His motivations are well-grounded. For Coleridge, "it is indeed never harmless to confound terms: for words are no passive Tools, but organized Instruments, re-acting on the Power which inspirits them."²⁴ With "incomparably greater ease and certainty than any other means," language impresses "modes of intellectual energy so constantly, so imperceptibly . . . as to secure in due time the formation of a second nature" (*BL*, II, 117); and, for this reason, careless use of words reflects and creates dangerous distortions of thought. "Unusual and new coined words are doubtless an evil; but vagueness, confusion and imperfect conveyance of our thoughts, are far greater" (*BL*, I, 189).

Coleridge's most famous method of refurbishing language and guarding against murky thinking is desynonymization; and he claims that "there are few mental exertions more instructive, or which are capable of being rendered more entertaining, than the attempt to establish and exemplify the distinct meaning of terms, often confounded in common use, and considered as mere synonyms."²⁵ In practice these finer distinctions, his desynonymization of words like agreeable, beautiful, picturesque, grand and sublime are finer, more accurate meanings; and some of his most celebrated critical insights are a product of this concern with verbal precision. To use his own metaphor, Coleridge fashions his powerful saws for critical investigation by honing the razor edge of words. Thus, he finds that fancy and imagination "were two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being according to the general belief, either two names with one meaning, or, at furthest, the lower and higher degree of one and the same power" (*BL*, I, 61). Similarly, the word *esemplastic* enters our vocabulary when "having to convey a new sense, I thought that a new term would both aid recollection of my meaning, and prevent its being confounded with the usual import of the word, imagination" (*BL*, I, 107). We could add to this list the myriad or original or newly fabricated terms that Coleridge introduces into our critical lexicon: totality of interest, mechanical talent, aesthetic logic, accrescence of objectivity, germ of character, real-life diction, undercurrent of feeling, the general tissue of the style, and many others. Barfield is absolutely correct in saying "Coleridge's influence on meanings is a profounder and, in the long term, more interesting study than his additions to our stock of words,"²⁶ for this word-obsession is not word play or pedantry but a practice based on the conviction that clarity and accuracy in diction are eminently important, and that "language is happily contrived to lead us from the vague to the distinct, from the imperfect to the

full and finished form."²⁷ The right word "becomes the point of penetration"²⁸ into the realm of ideas, and a manuscript note on a work of John Hunter provides a striking dramatization of this special power in words: "Still did he seem to miss the compleating Word that should have . . . reflected the Idea, . . . and have . . . placed it at the disposal of his own conscious . . . and voluntary Contemplation . . . for the Word is the first Birth of the Idea, and its flexible Organ."²⁹

This passion for an accurate correspondence between words and ideas often leads Coleridge to claim that there is a "physiognomy in words"³⁰ and to speculate on destroying the "old antithesis of *Words* and *Things*, and living *Things* too."³¹ This, however, is a dream that always dissipates in more sober moments when distance between the sign and the idea, becomes an inescapable fact. "Coleridge's feeling for words," Barfield observes, "was an integral part of his whole deeply-felt philosophy of the true relation between words and thoughts and things, and thus, and thus only, between words and things."³² Language does not reproduce things; it gives, rather, "outness to thought."³³ Whether we wish to designate the signified reality or reason or idea, the signifier is at best a soft-focus symbol; and only after the idea has been revealed to the reason can there follow "communication by the symbolic use of the Understanding, which is the function of Imagination."³⁴ In *Patterns of Consciousness*, Richard Haven observes that "one of Coleridge's frequently reiterated complaints concerns those who mistake the 'dead letter' for reality, who take literally what is properly figurative, who mistake 'congruous notions' for statements of absolute fact. . . . He saw words and theories composed of words as in themselves partial and inadequate." Thus Coleridge writes in a notebook entry which Haven quotes,

It is the instinct of the Letter to bring into subjection to itself the Spirit.—The latter cannot dispute—nor can it be disputed for, but with certainty of defeat. For words express generalities that can be made *so* clear—they have neither the play of colors, nor the untranslatable meanings of the eye, nor anyone of the thousand undescribable things that form the whole reality of the living fuel.

Haven concludes that Coleridge therefore "required of a reader that he take words not merely as signs of definitions, verbal concepts, but of symbols of what he can know only by reference to his own experience, his own 'Reason.'"³⁵ Besides "the language of words," Coleridge writes, "there is a language of spirits (*sermo interior*) and . . . the former is only the vehicle for the latter" (*BL*, I, 191). Thus, understanding and language stand at a considerable conceptual distance from the most significant experiences in life; and the highest truths "are reported only through the imperfect translation of lifeless and sightless *notions*. Perhaps, in a great

part, through words which are but the shadows of notions; even as the notional understanding itself is but the shadowy abstraction of living and actual truth" (*BL*, I, 168). If, on one hand Coleridge urges precision with language, there now seems to be a built-in deception in that precision, and Coleridge appears to contradict his own mandate when he asks "Whether or no too great definiteness of Terms in any language may not consume too much of the vital & idea-creating force in distinct, clear, full made Images & so prevent originality—*original* thought as distinguished from positive thought."³⁶

Coleridge's philosophy of language is not contradictory, however, only complex; and these complications are what shape the role of language in his literary criticism. In the notebook entry just quoted Coleridge differentiates positive thought and original thought, and these two modes of thought correspond to the critical activity and the poetic activity, a distinction that helps explain that controversial notebook entry in which Coleridge writes, "the elder Languages [were] fitter for Poetry because they expressed only prominent ideas with clearness, others but darkly. . . . When no criticism is pretended to, & the Mind in its simplicity gives itself up to a Poem as to a work of nature, Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally & not perfectly understood."³⁷ That many critics quote only the last clause of this passage is what creates so much confusion and does an injustice to Coleridge's thought, for what he in fact implies is not that poetry should be imperfectly understood, but that the reading of poetry has a two-fold movement: (1) "when no criticism is pretended to," the reader participates in "original thought" and the visionary realm of ideas where, as with Coleridge's experience of *The Prelude*, thoughts are "all too deep for words"; but (2) when criticism is the object, the reader must use his understanding or "positive thought" and here language is a necessary and valuable tool. Both movements are equally important and usually operate simultaneously; moreover, the authority of language seems negligible only when one attempts to compare it with ideas and original thought. From the perspective of eternal truth, understanding and language *are* relative; each is "the faculty of suiting measures to circumstances," "of adapting means to proximate ends."³⁸ But as a temporal vehicle in the service of the understanding, that language is indeed authoritative and thus should be as precise as possible, so that the understanding operate as efficiently and accurately as possible. In other words, a poem may be, as Coleridge indicates, a Kantian synolon, containing a single unique truth. But a reader can understand that truth in a variety of ways; he can write about that truth with different words and different languages, without diminishing either the nondiscursive mystery which is the center of the poem or the heuristic value of language and the understanding.

Implicitly emphasizing the relativity and variety of languages, these ideas on language and the reading experience have their roots in a philosophy which was fast becoming the most popular linguistic theory at the beginning of the nineteenth century. George Steiner outlines this trend in an article which posits two fundamental schools of linguistics, the relativists and the universalists. The universalists maintain that the underlying structure of all languages is the same and hence common to all men; the relativist holds that there are more differences than similarities in language and that those differences are the product of historical and cultural determinants. For the relativists, "no two languages construe the same world;" and one of Coleridge's primary sources, Leibniz, is an early linguistic relativist who in 1697 put forward the radical proposition that language is not simply the vehicle for thought but its determining medium.³⁹

From Leibniz to Coleridge, the line of relativists is quite clear, even if their philosophies of language differ on finer points. Vico, Hamann, Humboldt, and the Schlegels are the most distinguished exponents of this tradition, and Coleridge quickly assimilated and adapted their assumptions about language into his own system. In 1795 Coleridge notes that "every Age has its peculiar Language," and later in *Biographia Literaria* he elaborates: "everyman's language varies, according to the extent of his knowledge, the activities of his faculties, and the depth or quickness of his feelings. Everyman's language has, first, its *individualities*; secondly, the common properties of the *class* to which he belongs; and thirdly, words and phrases of *universal* use."⁴⁰ Needless to say, it is this relativistic assumption about language which lies behind Coleridge's criticism of Wordsworth's pretense to imitate the language of the common man. "We do not adopt the language of a class," Coleridge asserts, "by the mere adoption of such words exclusively, as that class would use, at least understand; but likewise by following the *order*, in which the words of such men are wont to succeed each other" (*BL*, II, 43-44). Furthermore, as I have been indicating throughout this essay, this relativistic nature of language mirrors the relativistic role of the understanding: two people using different languages will understand a phenomenon differently. Following Leibniz, Coleridge goes so far as to suggest "language itself does as it were *think* for us" on certain occasions (*BL*, I, 63n).

Operating together, these three components of reading—the mediate role of the understanding in the reader's literary experience, the relative nature of language, and the functional bond between language and understanding—provide, I believe, a fresh and elucidating perspective on Coleridge's criticism and critical language. They suggest, in short, that the

critical language plays a more determinant role in the reading of literature, and that those readings will be relative—in one sense—precisely because they are a product of language. That Coleridge is a relativist—especially regarding literature, will sound blasphemous in many quarters, unless one keeps in mind that we are discussing the critical understanding of a poem, not the ineffable vision of a poem, the rules for reading and judging a poem, not the principles of art. Invariably Coleridge stresses the fundamental principles of art as the foundation of criticism, but, in practice, he uses a relative language and rarely hesitates to pass judgements. The *Biographia Literaria* is perhaps the best evidence of the way Coleridge operates between these two poles, moving from principles to judgments; but like the relation between reason and understanding, the critical functions are never truly divided, just as the first part of the *Biographia* is integrally bound to the second. Critical judgments and evaluations may be the shadows of the principles from which they proceed, yet it is not “possible that the two could be separated” (*BL*, II, 63).

How the relativity of language actually manifests itself in Coleridge’s critical writings is a more difficult point, since it would seem that the relativity of language refers to larger historical and geographical patterns which have little bearing on Coleridge’s comparatively stable use of language. This stability is only apparently true, however; and Coleridge’s attitude toward contemporaneous but separate fields of knowledge sheds some light on this question. Shawcross voices what has become the common view:

It is necessary . . . to realize, first, that Coleridge did not believe in any such detached activity of the various faculties, as a physiological or psychological fact. Secondly, that although he could conceive of the mind as limiting itself, by its own free act, to a partial aspect of reality and to a partial self-activity, he saw that such an act, where it was not consciously recognized as an act of limitation, might be a fruitful source of error. (*BL*, I, LXXXVI)

Generally critics choose to ignore that fruitful act of limitation and examine closely the monistic vision that underlies it. But Coleridge himself recognized that if the monistic vision is the nobler, more spiritual activity, the partial kinds of knowledge in which it manifests itself are the more practical and usual way men perceive; consequently, “the man of genius devotes himself to produce by all other means, whether a statesman, a poet, a painter, a statuary, or a man of science, this same sort of something which the mind can know but which it cannot understand, of which understanding can be no more than the symbol and is only excellent as being the symbol.”⁴¹ The poet, the statesman, the scientist, that is, all have different ways of understanding because they rely on different semiotic systems, different discourses. In Coleridge’s time it was possible to isolate

a number of different discourses such as a scientific discourse, psychological discourse, or theological discourse, all of which have their own means of organizing signs for the attribution of meaning, as well as special connotations which carry over when these languages transfer to other disciplines. Clearly the distances between the separate discourses were not as great as they would become in the twentieth century when Steiner would point out that mathematics, music, psychology, and other disciplines have each developed a specialized language which is nearly incomprehensible to an outsider. But the differences between the languages of contemporary fields of knowledge were great enough in 1816 that Coleridge could discern an "Alphabet of Physics no less than of Metaphysics, of Physiology no less than of Psychology."⁴² Each of these discourses would be working toward the same truth, would eventually apprehend the same reality; but the mode of understanding would be significantly different and certainly relative. Coleridge asks, "why facts were ever called stubborn things? . . . Facts, you know are not truths."⁴³ Thus a poet and a scientist could describe the same reality in different ways; they could present different facts which follow from an identical truth. More important, when the literary critic employs a scientific discourse literature will necessarily be understood in an idiosyncratic way and special "facts" will appear in that criticism. Describing poetry with scientific terms, as Coleridge does in *Biographia Literaria*, is not an innocent act.

What creates these separate discourses is primarily their audiences. Recent linguists argue convincingly that languages and their laws are determined by a "circuit of discourse," so that what is understood between speaker and hearer delineates the perimeters of that language. For Coleridge also, the readers or listeners predetermine the kind of discourse an author chooses. "Be the work good or evil in its tendency, in both cases alike there is one question to be predetermined, viz. what class or classes of the reading world the work is intended for."⁴⁴ Readers

are not seldom picked and chosen. . . . If the Author have clearly and rightly established in his own mind the class of readers, to which he means to address his communications; and if both in this choice, and in the particulars of the manner and matter of the work, he conscientiously observes all the conditions which reason and conscience have been shewn to dictate, in relation to those for whom the work was designed; he will, in most instances, have effected his design and realized the desired circumscription. The posthumous work of Spinoza . . . may, indeed, accidentally fall into the hands of an incompetent reader. But (not to mention that it is written in a dead language) it will be entirely harmless, because it needs be utterly unintelligible. (*F*, I, 53-4)

Pedantry "consists in the use of words unsuitable to the time, place, and company. The language of the market would be in the schools as pedantic, . . . as the languages of the schools in the market. The mere man of the

world, who insists that no other terms but such as occur in common conversation would be employed in a scientific disquisition, and with no greater precision, is as truly a pedant as the man of letters, who either overrating the acquirements of his auditors, or misled by his own familiarity with technical or scholastic terms, converses at the wine table with his mind fixed on his museum or laboratory" (*BL*, I, 107-8). Therefore, to avoid pedantry and to be understood, a writer must carefully choose his audience and his occasion; he must choose a specific discourse. If we recall the mutual dependence of understanding and language, moreover, these choices become a major determinant in how and what a critic understands when he reads. "In reading," Phillippe Sollers says, "we must become aware of what we write unconsciously in our reading,"⁴⁵ an insight which corroborates Coleridge's note on Boehme where Coleridge equates understanding with the "mode of communicating." How a literary critic understands a poem and what he understands about it follows from the audience he foresees and the language he adapts. Sometimes—mostly in the twentieth century—this audience and language is exclusively literary (to the point of being rarified). With Coleridge this is seldom the case, and his criticism is quite often dominated by a political, scientific, psychological, or theological discourse, one or the other ruling depending on when and for whom he is writing. The appearance of these extra-literary discourses in his criticism is not, I believe, an accident. Moreover, given the constitutive nature of these languages, the implications are far-reaching.

The important point is that language is a singularly exact tool in literary criticism, suited for specific purposes and specific audiences, suited to enable a person to understand in a certain way. For Coleridge, some of the ways of understanding would be scientific, political, theological, or psychological. Indeed these may be simply distinctions not divisions; "nevertheless, it is of great practical importance, that these distinctions should be made and understood" (*F*, I, 177), especially regarding their effect on Coleridge's literary criticism. For different ways of reading, different kinds of criticism, and different meanings very often amount to approaching and understanding a text with different languages.

While literature would surround Coleridge throughout his career, non-literary disciplines would become the temporary center of his work at various times and for various reasons. Invariably the challenge of these other fields permeates his literary criticism and demands poetic meaning to be made in their terms. During his early years of political fervor, political rhetoric clearly controls his scattered comments on art and literature; in 1815 Coleridge's involvement in the medical controversy over the writings of John Hunter not only results in his scientific treatise *Theory*

of *Life* but leads Coleridge to write *Biographia Literaria* with a scientific language that would influence literary criticism for well over a century; and, in his last years Coleridge would deliver one of the most puzzling lectures on Aeschylus' *Prometheus* ever written, a lecture that can be explained only by Coleridge's immersion in the theological discourse found in his essays *On the Constitution of the Church and State*. In each of these cases, Coleridge translates his poetic experiences into discursive, extra-literary languages which do not just rephrase meaning but in many ways make meaning.⁴⁶ Without diminishing the specific truth which is at the heart of a particular poem, Coleridge uses an extra-literary language to actualize that truth, to make its meaning speak to a certain audience, to extend poetry's significance obtrusively beyond the realm of literature. With his acute sensitivity to language and its powers, Coleridge becomes a Protean reader, a chameleon critic, who uses different languages as subtle but powerful coding systems to determine what and for whom literature means. Certainly a penetrating and incisive reader, Coleridge is likewise an expansive reader. For him, the margins—of the text and of the mind—are always wide.

Temple University

NOTES

- 1 *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. John Colmer (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 134.
- 2 *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), I, 52. All further references to this edition will be abbreviated in the text. Since Rooke is unable to verify this passage, it is conceivable that Coleridge himself is the author.
- 3 *Logiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 237-38. As this quotation indicates, many of the guiding ideas for this essay come from a contemporary school of structuralist critics concerned with language and productive reading. I am not substituting their ideas for Coleridge's; nor am I trying to masquerade Coleridge as a structuralist. These structuralists suggest some new perspectives on criticism in general and certainly help to regulate many of Coleridge's fragmented notions. And this is where my debt lies. However it is worth noting that R. S. Crane's and Roman Ingarden's ideas about actualization influence this essay as much as Julia Kristeva's and Roland Barthes's work with naturalization and cultural coding.
- 4 *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (London: Dent & Sons, 1960), II, 39.
- 5 *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford U. Press, 1907), I, 34n. All further references to this edition will be abbreviated in the text.

- 6 "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in *New Directions in Literary History*, ed. Ralph Cohen (The Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1974), p. 130. The article originally appeared in *New Literary History*.
- 7 *What Coleridge Thought* (Wesleyan U. Press, 1971), p. 97. This quotation and some of the following material is clarified by a chart which Barfield reproduces from Coleridge's marginalia; it suggests how opposite faculties complement each other. This chart is also reproduced in *PQ*, 54 (1975), 621.
- 8 Barfield, p. 101.
- 9 *Aids to Reflection* (London: Pickering, 1839), pp. 16-17.
- 10 *Statesman's Manual*, ed. R. J. White (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 59.
- 11 Barfield, p. 96.
- 12 Cited in Richard Haven, *Patterns of Consciousness* (U. of Massachusetts Press, 1969), p. 14.
- 13 *Shakespearean Criticism*, II, 103-04.
- 14 *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (London: Oxford Press, 1912), p. 404; p. 408.
- 15 *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Harper Bros., 1858), V, 286. This fragment is from a note on Luther's *Table Talk*.
- 16 Marginal note reproduced in Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley* (London: Oxford U. Press, 1925), II, 58-59n.
- 17 *Aids to Reflection*, p. 169.
- 18 Cited in Barfield, p. 223, n. 30. Note in J. F. Blumenbach, *Über die Natürlichen Verschiedenheiten*.
- 19 Barfield, p. 99.
- 20 *Aids to Reflection*, p. 169.
- 21 *After Babel* (London: Oxford U. Press, 1975), p. 79.
- 22 See particularly J. Isaacs, "Coleridge's Critical Terminology," in *Essays and Studies*, XXI (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 86-105; and Owen Barfield, "Coleridge's Enjoyment of Words," in *Coleridge's Variety*, ed. John Beer (U. of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), pp. 209-19; and also Barfield's book on Coleridge.
- 23 *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (London: Oxford U. Press, 1956-59), I, 625-26.

- 24 Quoted from an unpublished manuscript in Kathleen Coburn, *Inquiring Spirit: A Coleridge Reader* (New York: Minerva Press, 1951), pp. 101-02.
- 25 "On the Principles of Genial Criticism," in *Biographia Literaria*, II, 226.
- 26 Barfield, "Coleridge's Enjoyment of Words," p. 217.
- 27 *S. T. Coleridge's Treatise on Method*, ed. Alice D. Synder (London: Constable & Co., 1934), p. 6.
- 28 Barfield, "Coleridge's Enjoyment of Words," p. 212.
- 29 Cited in *The Friend*, I, 474, n. 1. It appears in a MS fragment.
- 30 "The Theory of Life," in *Miscellanies, Aesthetic and Literary*, ed. T. Ashe (London: G. Bell, 1911), p. 585.
- 31 *Collected Letters*, I, 625-26.
- 32 Barfield, "Coleridge's Enjoyment of Words," p. 212.
- 33 *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, I (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), no. 1387.
- 34 Cited in Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*, p. 204, no. 29. From a note on the flyleaf of Tennemann's *Geschichte des Philosophie*, VII.
- 35 Haven, p. 154.
- 36 *The Notebooks of S. T. Coleridge*, I, no. 1016.
- 37 *The Notebooks of S. T. Coleridge*, I, no. 383.
- 38 *The Friend*, I, 176 and *Aids to Reflection*, p. 178.
- 39 George Steiner, "Whorf, Chomsky, and the Student of Literature," *New Literary History*, 4 (1972), 16.
- 40 *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 141, and *Biographia Literaria*, II, 41.
- 41 *The Philosophical Lectures*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 168.
- 42 *Collected Letters*, IV, 688.
- 43 *Table Talk*, 27 Dec. 1831.

44 *Collected Letters*, V, p. 168.

45 Sollers, p. 220.

46 Translation does not seem to me to be an adventitious way of describing this process, if one uses Steiner's broad definition of it or the model of "creative transposition" that Roman Jakobson suggests in his essay "On the Linguistic Aspects of Translation." Further, the process seems laboriously illustrated by Coleridge himself in "Religious Musings" where his footnotes literally translate poetic passages into political or psychological meaning.