

POETRY BOOKSHELF



SELECTED POEMS OF  
**S.T. COLERIDGE**  
James Reeve



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SAMUEL TAYLOR  
COLERIDGE

*Edited with an introduction  
and Notes  
by*

JAMES REEVES



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## THE POETRY BOOKSHELF

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## INTRODUCTION

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE was born on 21st October 1772 in the Devon village of Ottery St. Mary, where his father was vicar and master of the grammar school. He was the youngest of John Coleridge's nine sons. Although he afterwards spoke of unkindnesses received as a child, his roots in Ottery were deep. His visits in later life were not frequent or regular, but he kept up an intermittent correspondence with some at least of his brothers, although he was regarded as something of a black sheep in the Coleridge family. Whether or not he was actually maltreated, he was certainly one of those odd children who, perhaps from some deep-seated maladjustment to the society around them, are driven in upon themselves and find their most satisfying reality in tales and romances. Coleridge later attributed the beginnings of the ill-health which afflicted him all his life to some sort of rheumatic complaint caused by exposure to cold and wet when he was six. It was perhaps also by a sort of instinctive loyalty to the place of his birth that he retained all his life a thick west-country accent, which was noticed by visitors in London when he was over fifty.

When Coleridge was nine, his father died, and like other sons of the clergy in need of financial support he was sent as a boarder to Christ's Hospital in London. He remained there from 1782 to 1791. He had already something both of the attraction and the failings of a spoilt child. His mother doted on him, as had his father; and this early favouritism had probably aroused the jealousy and antagonism of one at least of his brothers. He was introspective, and sought solitude, yet the constant desire for love and attention had caused him to develop

the power to charm others—a power that never left him, that aroused excessive expectations and demands, and made him assume obligations towards others which he could not fulfil.

The boarding school system, based as it was on the tradition of 'charity', was harsh and repressive. By present standards schools were hopelessly understaffed, so that little supervision could be exercised over the treatment of younger and more sensitive boys by their elders. At first Coleridge suffered intense loneliness and homesickness; he took refuge in dreams, and under the mild sway of Matthew Field, master of the lower school, he seems to have been regarded as something of a dullard. Later, in the upper school, under the supervision of the redoubtable Charles Boyer, he began to develop those intellectual powers for which he was soon to become widely known. Boyer was a savage disciplinarian but, by the standards of the time, a good teacher. Coleridge never ceased to be grateful for the stern and exacting scholarship with which he prepared the older boys for entrance to the universities. Intelligent and sensitive boys often prefer a stern disciplinarian, so long as he is also a scholar, to one more easy-going, since the latter, by encouraging idleness, allows the stronger and less intelligent boys to indulge in the bullying which he is too lazy to check. Boyer did not suffer fools gladly, but Coleridge was not a fool. On the contrary, his intellectual precocity and his engaging manner of holding forth on abstruse philosophical questions earned him the respect of his fellows and the admiration of strangers. He was of striking and attractive appearance, with his dark, untidy hair, his compelling eyes, and the animation and brilliance of his features, which reflected the intelligence working within. Lamb, who was his junior at Christ's Hospital, later compared him in retrospect to the young Pico della Mirandola, philosopher of the Italian Renaissance.

At school Coleridge was befriended by a senior boy, Thomas Middleton, who, on leaving to go up to Cambridge, gave him

as a parting present a copy of the poems of William Lisle Bowles. The importance of these to Coleridge was less in any intrinsic merit they possessed than in the liberating influence they exercised on his own latent poetic powers. They seemed to offer an alternative to the mechanical and artificial verse of the followers of Pope and Gray, which at that time represented the current fashion in poetry.

Coleridge in his turn acted as friend and protector to a younger boy, John Evans, to whose home he became a frequent visitor. Here he met Mary Evans, with whom he formed a friendship at once familiar and romantic. During his years at Cambridge the attachment deepened into love and was the occasion of a sustained agony of indecision. From October 1791 until December 1794, with one protracted period of absence, Coleridge was at Jesus College, Cambridge. His rooms were on the ground floor, and his tendency to rheumatism was aggravated by the damp. It was soon after his residence at Cambridge began that the first mention of a recourse to opium as a narcotic occurs. Opium, or laudanum, was at that time widely used as a means of deadening pain, but little was known about its extremely harmful effects as a habit-forming drug. Of more immediate importance, however, was another factor in Coleridge's temperament which decisively established itself at Cambridge—his incapacity to organize his life, to direct his powers for any length of time to a single object. He had one of the liveliest, most impressionable and most discursive minds of which we know anything; in whatever direction it turned, it seemed as if he were bound to follow. He was unable to concentrate, for the sake of academic advancement, on what he conceived as the dull and pedantic discipline of the traditional classical curriculum; instead, his interest turned to philosophy, to æsthetics, to modern politics. This is scarcely to be wondered at. Left-wing politics—Radicalism or Jacobinism as it was then called—was in the air. 1789 was the year of the fall of the



Bastille, an event which Coleridge, like other young men of intelligence and spirit, had hailed as the momentous and decisive occurrence it undoubtedly was. The 1790's, like the 1930's, were one of the most intensely political decades in modern history. It seemed as if the inveterate despotism of the old order in Europe had been triumphantly challenged, and as if nothing could prevent the destruction of tyranny and the establishment of liberty for all those groaning under oppression. Young men could no more avoid being involved in political discussion in the days of Robespierre and Napoleon than in those of Hitler. Coleridge's rooms in Jesus became a meeting-place for men of eager and enquiring mind, who were intoxicated by his brilliance and eloquence. He loved an audience and never tired of talking, giving generously and freely of his intellectual wealth. Coleridge's earliest admirers indulged him by taking it for granted that he would, sooner or later, produce some marvellous work of intellect, no one was very sure what. Yet in hoping so much, and in constantly flattering him with their eager attention, they indulged the very tendency to inaction, to mere speculation, to which he was fatally prone. Had he been less free and open-hearted, had he been more calculating, more self-regarding in the management of his mental capital, he might have become a brilliant lawyer, an influential administrator, a political thinker of wide and lasting fame. But essentially he did not want to be any of these things: although, like most—perhaps all—good poets, he was interested in being happy, in the good life, the re-establishment of paradise lost. In many poets there is a latent man of action, inhibited by the fascination of thought, of dreams, of contemplation, and by the apparent uselessness or inadequacy of any specific course of action. To the man who can envisage great ends, all possible means are apt to seem insufficient. Only in the world of the imagination is the poet supremely free and effective. With regard to the management of practical life, Coleridge was

tragically ineffective. At Cambridge he got into debt, and his material difficulties so oppressed him that towards the end of 1793 he escaped from material problems by going up to London and enlisting as a trooper in the Light Dragoons under the alias of Silas Tomkyn Comberbache. He was an inefficient soldier, but won instant popularity with his fellow troopers, and his kindness and sympathy made him a successful hospital orderly.

His desperate course alarmed his relations and friends who persuaded him in April 1794 to obtain his discharge and return to Cambridge. In the summer of 1794 he met Robert Southey, and the two poets became close friends. This friendship was perhaps the most disastrous, as it turned out, that Coleridge ever made. Southey's temperament was diametrically opposed to Coleridge's—he was diligent, prudent, and purposeful. His sense of self-preservation was always well developed. Together they evolved the scheme which came to be known as Pantisocracy. This was of considerable importance in Coleridge's life, for it is a symbol both of his fundamental sincerity (the willingness to act upon his principles) and of his failure to achieve the practical expression of any of the plans his imagination was so prodigal in projecting. The scheme consisted in the setting up of an ideal community in North America, harmonious, self-supporting, and free from the tyranny of outworn social conventions. Ultimately, after irreconcilable differences of opinion about the composition of the expedition and the rules of the proposed society, the scheme died a natural death, but not until Coleridge found himself committed, in the interests of the scheme, to a disastrous marriage.

Robert Lovel, one of the intending Pantisocrats, was engaged to a Miss Mary Fricker, one of the five daughters of a Gloucester manufacturer. It was of course envisaged that each of the male members of the community would take a wife, and Southey became engaged to Edith, another of the sisters. Coleridge entered into an engagement to marry yet another sister, Sara.

She was pretty, and appeared to be amiable and industrious. But Coleridge was not in love with her, and he knew in his heart that they were unsuited. Something like panic, and an incapacity to face the consequences of his undertaking, seized him, and he fled to London, where he stayed at the 'Salutation and Cat' Inn, delighting his younger friend, Charles Lamb, with the charm and excitement of his company. Then, as at all times, Lamb was intoxicated by Coleridge's society and overstimulated by the infectious enthusiasm of his talk. He was helpless under the fascination of Coleridge, whom he admired and believed in, throughout the darkest days of his later misery. Their friendship suffered one temporary estrangement; but Lamb never ceased to revere Coleridge's genius and to acknowledge with profound gratitude his power to enrich and illuminate the experience of all who came under his spell.<sup>1</sup>

In London Coleridge also saw Mary Evans, with whom by this time he was in love. She was his ideal of feminine companionship, and if he could have brought himself to abandon Pantisocracy and the engagement to Sara Fricker, he might have made Mary his wife, and so altered the course of his existence.

Early in 1795 Coleridge was back in Bristol, where he soon began a series of lectures on political subjects in order to collect funds for the Pantisocratic venture. He continued to hesitate on the question of marriage with Sara. Southey upbraided him for trifling over his engagement, and Coleridge replied that his 'whole life had been a series of blunders'. The breach with Southey widened as it became clearer to Coleridge that the two were in disagreement about the fundamental principles of

<sup>1</sup> Even in Coleridge's darkest days Lamb remained his loyal friend and staunch advocate. When in 1811 Crabb Robinson ventured to use the expression 'Poor Coleridge', Lamb corrected him. 'He is,' he said, 'a fine fellow in spite of all his faults and weaknesses. Call him Coleridge; I hate *poor*, as applied to such a man. I can't bear to hear such a man pitied.' It was Lamb too who said of him, 'His face when he repeats his verses hath its ancient glory—an Archangel a little damaged.'

Pantisocracy. Southey was unwilling to share his money with the rest of the party, and seemed also to believe in the right of some to have servants. Coleridge would willingly have adopted the communistic principles which inspired the first Christians, but Southey, beneath his republicanism, was in embryo already the traditionalist and Tory man of property he later became. It appeared that, for the sake of her engagement with Coleridge, Sara had rejected two suitors, one at least a man of substance. In October 1795 they were married at St. Mary Redcliffe in Bristol and moved to a cottage in Clevedon. The Pantisocratic dream was over, and Coleridge emerged from it with the wife he had taken for its sake. In November he wrote at great length to Southey, soon to become his brother-in-law, saying that he was happy in his marriage and bitterly reproaching Southey with having betrayed the ideals which had brought them together. Referring to the watered-down plan which Southey had put forward, that of setting up a self-contained agricultural community in Wales as a substitute for the original scheme, he concluded: 'In short, we were to commence Partners in a petty Farming Trade. This was the Mouse of which the Mountain Pantisocracy was at last safely delivered!'

A chance acquaintance described Coleridge at this period as 'a young man of brilliant understanding, great eloquence, desperate fortune, and entirely led away by the feelings of the moment'. He himself admitted that he was deficient in will-power and unable to say 'No' to the repeated entreaties of friends and admirers to follow this or that course. His great need was for regular and remunerative employment. Pantisocracy having proved an empty dream, he was by no means without further reformatory schemes. He and some admirers conceived the notion of the first of those periodicals which were to occupy so much of Coleridge's time and energy and bring in such small material rewards. In January 1796 he began a tour through the Midlands to the North to promote interest

in *The Watchman*, a literary and political weekly. He also preached to Unitarian congregations at a number of places. He gained considerable attention, widespread esteem, and a promising list of subscribers. His letters describing this advertising tour are full of amusing episodes. A friend in Nottingham gave a prospectus of *The Watchman* to an aristocrat, who glanced at the motto: 'That all may know the truth, and that the truth may make us free', and remarked, 'A seditious beginning!' On being told that this motto was quoted from another author, the aristocrat said, 'What odds whether he wrote it himself or quoted it from any other seditious dog?' He was then told to look up the Gospel of St. John, Chapter VIII, verse 32, and he would find that the seditious dog was Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

High spirits, however, alternated with periods of depression and self-reproach. News of Sara's ill-health at home in Bristol made him anxious to get back, and the tour was curtailed. In February he wrote to a friend: 'I am almost heartless! My past life seems to me like a dream, a feverish dream! all one gloomy huddle of strange actions, and dim-discovered motives! Friendships lost by indolence, and happiness murdered by mismanaged sensibility! the present hour I seem in a quickset-hedge of embarrassments! For shame! I ought not to mistrust God!' <sup>2</sup>

He suffered from periodical attacks of ill-health and sleeplessness, as a relief from which he had recourse to opium.

He returned to Bristol and immersed himself in preparations for the appearance of the first number of *The Watchman*. This was published the following month, and the publication continued for ten issues until it was finally discontinued in May 1796 because it failed to pay its expenses.

Meanwhile, with Joseph Cottle, the Bristol bookseller, he was arranging for the publication of a volume of his poems, of whose contents he regarded *Religious Musings* as the most

<sup>1</sup> Letter to John Edwards, 29th January 1796.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Josiah Wade from Lichfield, February 1796.

important. Neither this nor any other of his projects brought him any relief from material worry. To Cottle he wrote in February 1796:

The Future is cloud & thick darkness — Poverty perhaps, and the thin faces of them that want bread looking up to me! — Nor is this all — my happiest moments for composition are broken in on by the reflection of — I *must* make haste — I am too late — I am already months behind! I have received my *pay* beforehand! — O way-ward and desultory Spirit of Genius! ill canst thou brook a task-master! The tenderest touch from the hand of *Obligation* wounds thee, like a scourge of Scorpions!

In May he accepted the generous offer by a Somerset friend, Thomas Poole, and a small group of admirers, of an annual payment of five guineas each, as a mark of their admiration. The total annuity amounted to £35 or £40,<sup>1</sup> and Coleridge was deeply touched by this genuinely philanthropic action, as well as to some extent relieved of financial worry. The payments continued until another benefactor offered Coleridge a far larger sum. The summer was spent in organizing a number of schemes for earning more money—journalism, lecturing, tutoring. A partial reconciliation with Southey was brought about. In September 1796 Coleridge's first child, Hartley, was born, and in December he moved with Sara and the baby to a cottage at Nether Stowey, in the Quantock Hills, south of Bristol, where they were neighbours of their friend and benefactor, Thomas Poole. To this period belongs Coleridge's self-portrait in a letter to the politician Thelwall:

As to me, my face, unless when animated by immediate eloquence, expresses great Sloth, & great, indeed almost ideotic, good nature. 'Tis a mere carcase of a face: fat, flabby, & expressive chiefly of inexpression. — Yet, I am told, that my eyes, eyebrows, & forehead are physiognomically good — ; but of this the Deponent knoweth not. As to my shape, 'tis a good shape enough, if measured

<sup>1</sup> In present-day values, about £200.

— but my gait is awkward, & the walk, & the *Whole man* indicates *indolence capable of energies*. — I am, & ever have been, a great reader — & have read almost every thing — a library-cormorant — I am *deep* in all out of the way books, whether of the monkish times, or of the puritanical era. . . . I seldom read except to amuse myself — & I am almost always reading. — Of useful knowledge, I am a so-so chemist, & I love chemistry — all else is *blank*, — but I *will* be (please God) an Horticulturist & a Farmer. I compose very little — & I absolutely hate composition. Such is my dislike, that even a sense of Duty is sometimes too weak to overpower it.<sup>1</sup>

In March 1797 began that close association with William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy which was one of the most important in Coleridge's life. The two men had first met in Bristol eighteen months before. Wordsworth and Dorothy settled at Alfoxden, only three miles away from Nether Stowey. The strength of the association that now began was due to its complementary character: Coleridge conceived an instant admiration for Wordsworth's achievement in poetry, for the naturalness and simplicity of its style in comparison with his own, which at this time was high-flown and florid. Wordsworth, as well as his sister, responded to the magnetism of Coleridge's personality, and the brilliance and fertility of his mind. Wordsworth was an indolent or indifferent reader, believing in the educative power of nature; Coleridge was omnivorous and insatiable, and deeply versed in ancient and modern learning. Coleridge perceived in Wordsworth those solid qualities of patience and tenacity of purpose which he himself lacked; Wordsworth found in Coleridge a foil to his own cautious and deliberate temperament.

The first of Coleridge's important poems written under the influence of Wordsworth's ideas was *This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison*, composed during the Wordsworths' first visit to Stowey with Charles Lamb. It is one of those expressions of the joy of

<sup>1</sup> Letters, 19th November 1796.

friendship which are among his best and most characteristic poems.

During the summer, owing to Coleridge's association with radical politicians such as Thelwall, he and Wordsworth became the object of the attentions of government spies. It was rumoured in the neighbourhood that sedition was being plotted at Alfoxden and Stowey, for this was the time when England was in the grip of the first invasion-scare. Wordsworth was already disillusioned with the hopes of world regeneration produced by the French Revolution in its opening phase, and Coleridge too lost interest in republicanism. Apart from poetry, his mind was continually occupied with philosophy and religion. He had by no means abandoned altogether the intention of earning a living as a Unitarian minister, and the material difficulties from which he still suffered, despite the generosity of friends, made him think once again of seeking some such employment. That winter, the approaching birth of a second child made some sort of material security imperative, and Coleridge went to Shrewsbury as candidate for a post as Unitarian minister. This was something of a crisis in his affairs. He made a very favourable impression on those who had invited him to consider the post, but he shrank from committing himself to a way of life which he knew would involve many irksome parochial duties and interfere with the free development of his intellectual and imaginative powers. Briefly, his sense of duty as a breadwinner was a strong inducement to accept the situation, while his instincts as poet made him draw back. He was on the point of accepting when the arrival of another offer proved decisive. Two brothers, Thomas and Josiah Wedgwood, of philanthropic temper and considerable wealth, offered Coleridge an annuity of £150 as a mark of their admiration and their confidence in his genius. The offer was unconditional and the annuity was to go on indefinitely, subject only to the continuance of the Wedgwoods' prosperity.



Coleridge was overcome by this munificence. He wrote at once to Josiah Wedgwood accepting the offer, and expressing his gratitude and admiration. He concluded: 'Disembarrassed from all pecuniary anxiety yet unshackled by any regular profession, with powerful motives & no less powerful propensities to honorable effort, it is my duty to indulge the hope that at some future period I shall have given a proof that as your intentions were eminently virtuous, so the action itself was not unbeneficent.'<sup>1</sup>

At this point it is worth while pausing to consider the comments of one of Coleridge's most distinguished biographers, Sir Edmund Chambers;<sup>2</sup> of his acceptance of the Wedgwood annuity, Chambers says:

Perhaps the worst thing possible had happened to him. He had talked long enough; sown enough wild oats. I do not suggest that he should have become a Unitarian minister. But it was time for him, in one way or another, to take up his share of the economic burden which is, or ought to be, the common lot of humanity. Instead, here was an endowment which, in terms at least, left it possible to go on just as he had always done. It is true that his first impulse was to recognize in full the moral obligation which it imposed upon him. . . . But, unfortunately, the longer Coleridge looked at a moral obligation the more he became inclined in practice to shy away from it.

This is typical of the unsympathetic misunderstanding which has continued to dog Coleridge's memory for more than a century. Time and again his instincts as a creative writer made it impossible for him to accept regular employments. Nobody could have been more severely critical than he was of himself over his failure to meet obligations; but to entangle himself in such commitments was, to him, the supreme impossibility; it was a betrayal of those powers which he knew to be in him-

<sup>1</sup> Letters, 17th January, 1798.

<sup>2</sup> *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Biographical Study*. Oxford, 1938.