

The Coleridge Bulletin

New Series 27, Summer 2006

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# Coleridge and the Life of Language

Ross Wilson

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IS LANGUAGE ALIVE? Does it make sense to ask such a question, given that, we may assume, language is neither a person, nor an animal, nor any of the other things or beings that we usually think of as either alive or dead? Questions about the real life of language might not have appeared as strange to Coleridge as they do, perhaps, to us. For instance, Hans Aarsleff's influential book, *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*, charts the development of thinking about language in this period, showing that, roughly, language was thought of mechanistically, then organically, and then according to a geological paradigm. Central to the second phase of this development was the conviction that language is living. Aarsleff comments on how the study of language became, in the eighteenth century, 'a branch of natural history': 'That the history of a race or nation follows the same course as a human being from birth to old age was not a new idea; but it was new that language itself and its development not only could be conceived in terms of that metaphor, but actually in a real sense had a life of its own as if it were an organism.'<sup>1</sup> Aarsleff has demonstrated here how difficult it is to think of language as really alive. His double-pronged insistence that language is alive 'actually in a real sense' is not quite enough to puncture the doubt, which appears in his cautionary 'as it were', that talk about the life of language might not be really literal, that what is meant cannot really be that language is actually alive.

Perhaps it would be best, therefore, to stick to some fairly minimal criteria for the life of language, which might, at the same time, preserve some of the sense that the historical development and growth, birth and death, of languages is somehow significant. So, a living language would be one that can be heard being spoken in the street—or in the market and at the tea-table (BL I 87)—or read in today's paper; a dead language would be one that ceased to be heard long ago and is not used to tell us about what happened only yesterday. But it is not clear whether for Coleridge these would be sufficient criteria by which to take a language's pulse.<sup>2</sup> Of course, as he argues in his 1818 'Lectures on the Principles of Judgement, Culture, and European Literature', the poetic turn to the vernacular is a significant moment in the history of literature because 'the use of their living Mother-language enabled the inspired Poet to appear instead of the toilsome Scholar.' (LL II 91) And *The Statesman's Manual* opens with a

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<sup>1</sup> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 152. Aarsleff is commenting specifically on J.G. Herder's view of language here. For a discussion of how a historical reading of language might counter the insistence that linguistic signs are arbitrary, and thus by implication counter the view that language is not a living organism, see J.H. Prynne, *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words* (London: Birkbeck College, 1993), especially p. 5. Consideration of whether language is either arbitrary or natural, while it is not central to the concerns of this essay, is important to Coleridge's theory of language. For a discussion see James C. McKusick, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language*, Yale Studies in English, 195 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 4-32. On the connection between language and history in Coleridge, see Mary Anne Perkins, 'Coleridge, Language and History', in *Coleridge's Visionary Languages: Essays in Honour of J.B. Beer*, ed. by Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993), pp. 181-94.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Ricks has also questioned the extent to which dead languages are really all that dead. See *Beckett's Dying Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; reprinted 1995), p. 97 on the 'rich muddle' of the OED's definition of a dead language.

denunciation of those that so obviously infringe on the intentions of ‘the gracious Donor’ of the Bible by insisting on ‘the interment of such a treasure in a dead language’ (LS 5). But mere translation of the Bible into English, Appendix A to that sermon argues, is not sufficient unless complemented by ‘those inward means of grace, without which the language of the Scriptures, in the most faithful translation and in the purest and plainest English, must nevertheless continue to be a dead language: a sun-dial by moonlight.’ (LS 57) It is significant that language is here a machine or an instrument that will not work properly because it lacks its animating element. This essay will show that central to Coleridge’s philosophy of what he famously called ‘the blessed machine of language’ (F I 108) is a view of the nature of language as at once both mechanical and living.<sup>3</sup> First, it will be shown that, according to Coleridge’s theory of life, the idea of a living machine, and, to some extent, also of a living thing, involves contradiction. Coleridge’s theory of life, in common with other Romantic theories of life, depends on the distinction of mechanism from organisation, and on the centrality of the latter to the definition of life. Second, the sense in which Coleridge sees language as living will be examined, and it will be argued that the life of language is, for Coleridge, the life of a machine.

Some of the most characteristic features of Coleridge’s views on the life of language have been insightfully discussed in the secondary literature. For example, James C. McKusick’s indispensable study, *Coleridge’s Philosophy of Language*, notes the numerous occasions on which Coleridge insists not only that words are things, but that they are living things.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, McKusick comments that ‘Since language is the only medium by which thought can gain ascendancy over things, words themselves take on the attributes of consciousness—they are living words (“verba viventia”).’<sup>5</sup> As far as they go, such glosses of Coleridge’s notion that words are *verba viventia* are adequate descriptions of the life of language. But they do not fully account for the apparent contradiction that language might be, at the same time that it is alive, either a thing or, more pressingly, a machine. Likewise, the senses in which ‘words are things’ not only for Coleridge, but also for Wordsworth, Byron, Blake, and Shelley, has received renewed attention, to fascinating effect, in William Keach’s recent *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics*.<sup>6</sup> Keach notes Coleridge’s ‘self-consciousness about the rhetorical figure’ according to which ‘words are not so much reified as corporealized’ in an important passage

<sup>3</sup> The conflict between the mechanism and the blessedness of language was, of course, discussed in Jerome Christensen, *Coleridge’s Blessed Machine of Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). This paper departs from Christensen, however, by examining ‘life’ in the context of Coleridge’s attempts to grasp the nature of language, rather than to account for ‘the literary life of a man of letters’. On the latter, see Christensen’s ‘The Mind at Ocean: The Impropriety of Coleridge’s Literary Life’, in *Romanticism and Language*, ed. by Arden Reed (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 144-67.

<sup>4</sup> *Coleridge’s Philosophy of Language*, pp. 41-52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 21-45. Keach’s ‘Romanticism and Language’, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; reprinted 2004), pp. 95-119, is an excellent introduction to the topic.

from his notebooks.<sup>7</sup> Both McKusick and Keach, while offering extremely informative accounts of Coleridge's philosophy of language, only touch upon the ways in which words might be said to be alive according to Coleridge. In particular, the possible tensions involved in thinking of words as, on the one hand, things, and, on the other hand, as alive, are not fully explored in the existing scholarship. Moreover, this comparison of words to things is even more complicated when those things are instruments and machines. This essay, therefore, is an examination of *precisely how* Coleridge conceives of words and language as alive.

In order to understand Coleridge's view of the life of language, it is necessary first briefly to set out what he meant by 'life'. In particular, it needs to be seen why it is incongruous, in the context of his philosophy, to think of a machine as living.<sup>8</sup> Throughout his writing, Coleridge declared himself an inveterate opponent of what he described in his 'Theory of Life' as 'the absurdity of the corpuscularian or mechanic system' (SWF I 525). Of course, the opposition between organic and mechanistic cosmologies and theories of life was fundamental to Romantic polemics against what were taken to be the prevailing philosophies of the Enlightenment. Moreover, Coleridge mocks the notion that human beings, at least, might be viewed as living machines, just before, incidentally, he describes language as a 'blessed machine' (F I 107-108). This proximity of apparently conflicting evaluations of machines does, however, testify to a greater subtlety in Coleridge's thinking regarding the opposition between the mechanical and the living. Mechanism and organisation have an important inter-relationship in, for example, the 'Theory of Life' itself: "Thus, from its utmost *latency*, in which life is one with the elementary powers of mechanism, that is, with the powers of mechanism considered as qualitative and actually synthetic, to its highest manifestation, (in which, as the *vis vitae vivida*, or life *as* life, it subordinates and modifies these powers, becoming contradistinguished, *ab extra*, under the form of organization,) there is an ascending series of intermediate classes, and of analogous gradations in each class." (SWF I 511) To this is appended the following note: "Thus we may say that whatever is organized from without, is a product of mechanism; whatever is mechanised from within, is a production of organization." (ibid.) That this view of the relationship between organism and mechanism implies their opposition is made clearer in the twelfth of Coleridge's 1818-1819 'Lectures on the History of Philosophy', according to which 'It appears, then, that if I am to attach any meaning at all to the word "organisation" it must be distinct from mechanism in this, that in all machines

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 30. Keach is commenting on a notebook entry in MS Egerton 2801, f.145, to be found in *Inquiring Spirit: A Coleridge Reader*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 101. See Keach, p. 164, n.22.

<sup>8</sup> Much has been written on Coleridge's theory of life, and the summary given here is necessarily brief. For a fuller discussion, see the essays in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life*, ed. by Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), in particular Roe, 'Introduction: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life' pp. 1-21 for a useful overview. In addition, see Charles I. Armstrong's recent *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife* (Palgrave Macmillan: Houndmills, 2003), pp. 51-80.

I suppose the power to be from without, that if I take my watch there is nothing in the component parts of this watch that constitutes it peculiarly fit for a watch, or produce[s] it.' (LHP II 524) What is clear, therefore, is that one way of approaching the question 'what is life?' is to view it as asking for information regarding 'the power that moves the whole machine' (SWF I 506) and that this power is ultimately organic rather than mechanical.<sup>9</sup> It is clear, then, that when power operates a machine *ab extra*, then the machine is just a machine. But is it clear that the power that operates language is to be assigned either to its outside or to its inside in any straightforward way?

Coleridge's emphases on the life of language do not depend on the rejection of the notion that language might in some ways be mechanical. Now, while Coleridge identified a number of figures in the history of philosophy with the mechanistic philosophy that he sought to refute, one figure is most prominent as an advocate of the materialistic, mechanistic study of language. The influence of John Horne Tooke on the development of subsequent linguistics generally, and on Coleridge's theory of language in particular, has been well-documented.<sup>10</sup> It is necessary to turn again here to Coleridge's reception of Horne Tooke and to examine in particular Coleridge's recorded suggestions of a revised title for Horne Tooke's *Epea Pteroenta, or, the Diversions of Purley*. James Tomalin reported that Coleridge made such a suggestion in his 1811-1812 'Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton in Illustration of the Principles of Poetry': 'Horne Tooke had called his book *Epea Pteroenta*, winged words. In Coleridge's judgement it might have been much more fitly called *Verba Viventi*, or "living words" for words are the living products of the living mind & could not be a due medium between the thing and the mind unless they partook of both. The word was not to convey what a certain thing is, but the very passion & all the circumstances which were conceived as constituting the perception of the thing by the person who used the word.' (LL I 273) It should be noted that this is already a development of, and, in some senses, a departure from, Coleridge's earlier dictum, repeated in a number of places, that 'words are things'. It seems to be the case for Tomalin's Coleridge that a word is supposed to convey not only the thing, but also the passion and circumstances that, according to the conception of the person using the word, constituted the perception of the thing. It is then taken to follow from this, therefore, that the word too must be alive because it is supposed to convey the passion and circumstances of a living being, as well as being supposed to convey a thing. This argument deploys the same logic according to which Coleridge had earlier concluded that 'words are things'. Words were things, for Coleridge, because only by being things were they able to mediate things. Words are alive, for Coleridge, because only by being alive are they able to mediate living passion.

The comment on Horne Tooke's title from the lecture of 1811-12,

<sup>9</sup> For a clear statement of the battle between mechanistic and organicist philosophies during the Enlightenment and early Romanticism, see M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953; reprinted 1971), p. 186.

<sup>10</sup> On Horne Tooke's relationship with and impact on Coleridge, see, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language*, pp. 33-52.

therefore, proposes what might be called a strong version of the real life of words, potentially keeping perfectly in tact the opposition between mechanism and organisation. It is not apparent from that suggestion for the revision of Horne Tooke's title that the life of language might be conceived alongside its mechanism in Coleridge's thinking. However, thirteen years later, Coleridge made the same suggestion in slightly, though crucially, different words, this time in print, at the beginning of the *Aids to Reflection*: 'Horne Tooke entitled his celebrated work, Ἔπεα πτερόεντα, Winged Words: or Language, not only the Vehicle of Thought but the Wheels. With my convictions and views, for ἔπεα I should substitute λόγοι, i.e., Words select and determinate, and for πτερόεντα ζῶοντες, i.e. living Words. The Wheels of the intellect I admit them to be; but such as Ezekiel beheld in "the visions of God" as he sat among the Captives by the river of Chebar. "Whithersoever the Spirit was to go, the Wheels went, and thither was their Spirit to go: for the Spirit of the living creature was in the wheels also.'" (AR 7) This passage is extremely significant for the role of mechanism in Coleridge's articulation of the life of language. It is notable, for instance, that Horne Tooke's wings become wheels: the organs of a living creature become mechanical devices. Although the wings of Horne Tooke's title belong to Hermes, and are attached to his sandals rather than to his body, this is still a significant metamorphosis, which complicates any reading of Coleridge's insistence on the life of words as straightforwardly organic, opposed to Horne Tooke's putatively mechanistic view.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the order of priority between words and intellect is rather cleverly complicated here. Words are the wheels 'of the intellect: that is, they belong to the intellect, which may, therefore, be said to have some power or influence over them. This is the sense that the quotation from Ezekiel is meant to reinforce. But words are also the wheels 'of the intellect in that they enable the intellect to move. They, therefore, enable, or have power over, it.

So far, then, we have seen not only that Coleridge wants emphatically to insist on the life of language, but also that this insistence does not rely on the repudiation of the notion that language is mechanical, or, alternatively, instrumental. We have also seen that this result might be contrary to what we would have expected in the light of Coleridge's theory of life. This is not to say, however, that the relationship between the living and mechanical aspects of language is not, as it were, a tense one. The mechanisation of language is not always positively evaluated in Coleridge's writings. Moreover, linguistic mechanisms or mechanised language are not always alive. On the one hand, the mechanisation of language seems to be some sort of fault in, or mere simulation of, real language. On the other hand, it sometimes appears that language has its own life, that it is a living power of its own accord, *ab intra*. First, then, the opposition between language 'mechanistically and

<sup>11</sup> On Hermes' wings and the frontispiece to the *Diversions of Purley*, see William Keach, *Shelley's Style* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 180-81. Note too that the wheels of the chariot in Ezekiel are not wholly dissociated from 'the living creature'. See, in particular, Ezekiel 1. 15-21. The AV translation of verse 15 is difficult to follow; the NRSV rendering helps to untangle this dense passage.

manipulatively used' and 'the whole organic and lively process of communication and reason' has been starkly put in Mary Anne Perkins essay on history and language in Coleridge's late thinking.<sup>12</sup> While the *Biographia Literaria* has a number of important machines, the smooth running of which is fundamental both, for examples, to common sense (BL I 86-87) and to criticism (BL II 111), worries about the mechanisation of language are central to Coleridge's response to the kind of poetry stemming, for want of a more mechanical rather than organic metaphor, from Pope's allegedly 'pseudo-poetic diction' (BL I 39). Having noted the ruggedness of the English language in the age of Chaucer and Gower, Coleridge complains that 'now, partly by the labours of successive poets, and in part by the more artificial state of society and social intercourse, language, mechanized as it were into a barrel-organ, supplies at once both instrument and tune.' (BL I 38). The problem with this kind of mechanism is not so much that it is mechanised but that the power that operates it is deficient. Words are allowed simply to whirl on, manufacturing poems, without any intelligent intervention.

Second, that words can have what at least appears to be their own power is often fundamental to Coleridge's view of language, despite the negative connotations with which this idea is associated in the *Biographia Literaria's* denunciation of contemporary poetic production. This is at the heart of the advice that Coleridge gives at the beginning of *Aids to Reflection*. Readers are to reflect on their thoughts 'and—which will be of especial aid to you in forming a habit of reflection,—accustom yourself to reflect on the words you use, hear, or read, their birth, derivation and history. For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined, and humanized.' (AR 10) As we have seen, Coleridge had insisted precisely that words are things, as well as that when language is powered by itself it is as tuneful as a barrel-organ. However, the contradiction here of the earlier claim that words are things does not sever the relationship between words and things but revises the order of priority that might otherwise be assumed to hold in that relationship. Likewise, the sense in which words are living powers does not exclude the possibility that this living power is given to words *ab extra*, only to continue to power language's machinery.

Where does all of this leave Coleridge's sense that language is at once living and a machine? It is important to Coleridge's philosophy of language that language is a living machine because, firstly, its power is given to it from outside, but, secondly, its power is the mind, which seems able to endue its machines with a power of their own, as it were, in a way not available to merely physical power. The apparently contradictory notion of a living machine does, therefore, remain the most significant paradigm for Coleridge's thinking about language. Making one of his favourite points—that the confusion of terms is never innocuous—he remarks in his 'Tables of Categories' that 'words are no

<sup>12</sup> Perkins, 'Coleridge, Language and History', p. 187.

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passive Tools, but organized Instruments, re-acting on the Power which inspirits them.’ (SWF II 1210)<sup>13</sup> This allows us to see more clearly how language might live and, crucially, how it might at the same time be a kind of machine, or, here, a kind of instrument. Language is inspirited, and inspirited in such a way that its mechanism takes on the power of the inspiriting agent. It is indeed, in some senses, a barrel-organ, although one that is not simply allowed to drone on. It is crucial to the machine of language that the power operating it is not itself mechanical. This might mean, for Coleridge, that some kinds of words are more alive than others. He comments in ‘The Science and System of Logic’, eventually published, alongside ‘Life’, as *Monologues of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Esq.*, in *Fraser’s Magazine*, 12 (1835), that ‘The conjunctions, in the largest sense of the term, are the true λογοι, the *verba viventia* of languages. How, indeed, can it be otherwise, seeing that all connexion is of necessity given by the mind itself?’ (SWF II 1023) Language is a living machine powered by the mind. But this power is no mere ghost in the machine. It is felt where words are brought together to form language, where parts form a whole, and where the whole, therefore, is alive. Language is a machine because its power is given from without by the mind; language is alive because that power, which is not mechanical, lives on.

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy Corrigan takes this insight and others like it as a motivation for Coleridge’s many neologisms. See *Coleridge, Language, and Criticism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), p. 21.