Reflections on the Work and Life of John Beer

Richard Gravil

John Beer at the Wordsworth Conference

After the death of Pete Laver in 1983, John Beer's contribution to a memorial volume for Pete (*Coleridge's Imagination*, 1985) was a magisterial essay on 'The Languages of *Kubla Khan*'. What remained of it, after the editors had removed about a third of its generous content, ran to forty-five pages of intellectual brilliance, filling almost one-sixth of a fifteen-essay collection. From the author, thus butchered, came not one word of remonstrance. For that forbearance towards a team of apprentice editors, thank you, John.

Those 'languages', by the way, the subject being Coleridge, included 'the language of myth and symbol', 'the language of genius and sensuousness', and trace languages of the tribe of poets including Milton and Gray and Spenser, alongside the simpler 'language of loss'. It is a bravura performance. But few have written better of the 'the language of loss' in its purest state—in, for example, 'She dwelt among th'untrodden ways'—than John did, in *Wordsworth and the Human Heart*. Glossing that 'violet by a mossy stone / Half-hidden from the eye' John teased out the poem's imagistic logic thus: 'at the one pole the flower, focus of human affection, and tenderness for the particular, at the other the single star, focus of the human imagination and of wondering perception. Lucy possesses the qualities of both poles.'

It was not, however, the imagined 'Lucy' but the very real Catherine who inspired John to a very great lecture, delivered decades ago at the Wordsworth Summer Conference. It was an impassioned meditation on Milton's 'Methought I saw my late espoused Saint' and Wordsworth's 'Surprized by Joy'. There is nothing quite like an hour of sustained concentration on fourteen or twenty-eight lines of poetry, to display the intellectual resources of a lecturer and remind one what poetry can do. The fact that no such essay appears in the bibliography of John's work is a mystery to me, so I cannot check at this date what made it so intellectually and humanly impressive. It just stands out in memory as one of the most authentic meditations on Wordsworth I ever heard, welling from sources deep within the human heart, but with all of John's perfect control and finesse. Masterly: but, as far as I can tell, never published. 'Loss' indeed.

Compared with other Wordsworth Conference denizens, such as David Erdman who could sit by the Rothay wearing a flat cap and holding a shepherd's crook and looking as if he belonged to the place by right of shepherding, and Tom McFarland striding over the fells, John never looked quite at ease out of doors. I remember him attempting to follow Richard Wordsworth straight up a fellside after a reading of 'Michael' in the 1970s, slithering as the leather soles of his black city shoes failed to find purchase on the slippery turf, determined not to be baulked by mere matter. But indoors,

for over three decades, John was the indispensable presence. He delivered annual lectures over a longer period than any other scholar and, appropriately, spoke for 'the faculty' at the 40th anniversary dinner in 2010. For me, that mystery lecture on those sonnets of bereavement remains one of the stellar events in the forty-eight years of the Wordsworth Conference's continuing conversation.

Kathleen Wheeler

Envisioning John Beer's Coleridge

While driving in the late 1990s with John Beer and Denise Degrois, from Cambridge to Somerset for one of the July Coleridge conferences at Cannington College, the three of us described to each other the substance of our coming papers. John then remarked that we would all clearly agree Coleridge was the finest mind of his age. We both readily concurred. Denise asked John how one could best articulate Coleridge's particular genius and its difference from other great thinkers of his era. This short piece seeks to characterise John's inimitable appreciation of Coleridge's uniqueness and the radiant quality of his intellect by focussing on his first book on Coleridge. Over a period of forty-three years, as a graduate supervisor, colleague, and much-loved friend, John explored with me this Coleridgean genius on innumerable occasions, through Coleridge's thoughts about language, poetry, the human mind, and how perception and imagination combine to produce works of art. Over four decades, we never stopped thinking or talking about Coleridge. He was the love of our intellectual lives, however much we enjoyed other writers. That shared passion informed out friendship and gave it a warmth and radiance I have never before or since experienced. In the last six weeks of our meetings in September and October of 2017, before I went off to America for several months, John Drew was there with us; as Keats said of his meeting with Coleridge in Highgate in 1819, 'we broached a thousand things', and I can still hear John's voice today.

In *Coleridge the Visionary* (1959, 1970), John described romanticism as a "distinct departure in the human mind, significant in fields outside literature and possessed of characteristics that can be recognized and described. Even when it reverted to the art of earlier periods, the very manner of its reversion bore witness to its own essential originality" (11). For Coleridge, romanticism brought to light factors which the age's narrow rationalism had ignored: romanticism restored to reason qualities withheld by an overly empirical age. Pre-eminently amongst romantic thinkers, Coleridge saw the necessity for a poetry and philosophy ministering "to the human consciousness as a whole" (14): a great poet must also be a great metaphysician. John also noted Coleridge's constant insistence on the role of the imagination in all aspects of human life, and his belief that deadly consequences will follow its neglect (295).

John, in this first book, distinguished two main, contrasting types of

romantic poets: (a) those whose works represent an intense search for significance and (b) those like Coleridge whose works present significance achieved (22-3). To characterise the second type of poet, he quoted Virginia Woolf on Coleridge's "exaggerated self-consciousness endowed with an astonishing power of self-analysis" (27-8). In addition, the Coleridgean romantic poet usually sought to incorporate scientific truths into his poetic vision, though Blake would be an exception. Nevertheless, Blake and Coleridge were indeed "congenial beings of another sphere, breathing for a while on our earth" (31, remark from an anonymous speaker). While Blake showed less enthusiasm for synthesising Reason and Imagination, he and Coleridge did share a visionary language of symbols and metaphors to express a sense of Unity, Wholeness, and Infiniteness beyond any discursive language and beyond a purely individual experience. Put another way, a series must be converted into a whole – a straight line must assume to our Understanding a circular motion.

The systematic use of metaphor and symbol becomes a method of thought and writing, using, as did Shelley, a "myth of metaphor" as the mode of communication *par excellence*. Through such visionary language, the individual can gain an intuition of a universality of which he himself is not merely a conduit, but a symbol of that larger being.

In *Coleridge's Visionary Language* (edited by Tim Fulford and Morton Paley, D. S. Brewer, Cambridge: 1993), Denise, in her "Coleridge on Human Communication" (pp. 99-109), enlarged on John's 1959 ideas, emphasizing Coleridge's grasp of the continuity between the anguish of fragmentary communication and the intuition of the wholeness of symbolic truths. However, Coleridge never surrendered to fragmentation or drifting: instead, Denise wrote, he sought to define and clarify the problem and, at times, overcame the obstacles that clutter our highways of thought. Coleridge tried "to extend and revise human communication beyond 'fixities and definites', hoping to reconcile" these fragments and oppositions which "slow down the stream of history" (109). Coleridge's words sought to revive 'dead metaphors' and images, words which became less interpreters than 'fellow combatants' in the struggle to achieve significance.

Efficient communication was, for Coleridge, a human spiritual need, however partial and however difficult its fulfilment. But the "mere transmission of static models of thought or accumulated information" contrasted sharply with his life-long artistic goal "to promote a dynamic quality of interchange" between audience and artist. Visionary language entails the "tireless introspective observation of the intricacies of the speaking and writing subject …—a constant quest for lucidity" (Degrois, 101-102). In this quest, words must first be 'desynonimised', then contemplated in their relations – not to "things only…but likewise and chiefly the relations of things either… to each other, or to the observer, or to the state and apprehension of the hearers" *(Friend* I 451, quoted in Degrois, 103). Such desynonimising and clarifying leads beyond preliminary processes of reading, analysis, or criticism, toward a

'genial communication' with the writer, whereby the reader responds creatively, in a spirit similar to that of the artist in the making of a work of art.

Coleridge the Visionary was first published in 1959, and reissued in 1970 (the edition used here). It guided the way toward a kind of literary criticism on Coleridge more significant than had occurred before. Now, nearly sixty years after its publication, it is still the best introduction to Coleridge, whether for students or scholars. John illuminated Coleridge's genius and showed what gave it its radiance—what made him the pre-eminent thinker of his age. His book "studied compression" — and 'geniality' — and arrived at some of the finest insight into Coleridge available to us today.

Morton Paley

John Beer on William Blake

John Beer's contributions to Blake studies are many and varied, but I begin here with *Coleridge the Visionary* because of the great importance this brilliant book has had for my work on Blake. When it appeared in 1959, the Romantic poets had been in intellectual exile for decades. If a fellow graduate student had not suggested that this book might help me with my dissertation on Blake, my own work might have been deprived of its enrichment for years to come. One of the major themes of *Coleridge the Visionary* is the significance of Jakob Boehme to Coleridge. It was of course known that Boehme had been important to Blake, as he himself testified in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and in a letter of 1800. Although there are only a few mentions of Blake in *Coleridge the Visionary*, Blake's affinities with Boehme struck me immediately, especially as quoted in the rich prose of the magnificently illustrated four-volume "Law edition": *The Works of Jacob Behmen, the Teutonic Theosopher* (so called because the translators were disciples of the nonjuring clergyman William Law). Incredibly, at the New York Public Library, these magnificently printed and strikingly illustrated volumes were not in the Rare Books Division (then notorious for its short hours and long delivery times) but in the general stacks. I kept them on reserve so I could return to them at any time during the Library's opening hours. Fascinated by their magnificent prose, I became more and more involved, as had Coleridge and John Beer after him, with the structure of Boehme's thought, and this in turn led me to the core of Blake's.

John Beer published volumes on Blake in 1968 (*Blake's Humanism*) and in 1969 (*Blake's Visionary Universe*). John had a special genius for bringing out relationships between poets without blurring the distinctions among them. *Blake's Humanism* is remarkable for, among other features, its discussion of *Milton* and Milton, executed with characteristic delicacy and insight. His exposition in *Blake's Visionary Universe* is remarkable for its attention to Blake's pictorial art as well as to his writings, as, for example, in the detailed

(and controversial) examinations of the paintings known as *The Spiritual Condition of Man* (Fitzwilliam Museum) and the Arlington Court Picture (National Trust), pictures that have stimulated considerable scholarly interpretation. In both these books, Blake is viewed not as the creator of a rigidly structured system but, rather, as a mind in progress, as when John says that in *Jerusalem,* "Light, not energy, love, not desire are the final keys to the fourfold vision in which Albion rises again" (171).

John's elucidation of Blake in relation to other poets of the Romantic era, as in his essay "Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth," never falls into the error of making these figures seem more alike than they are; his acute critical intelligence respects the unique sensibility of each. After stating that his method "is necessarily reliant on something less tangible than records," he writes: "If such an approach is necessarily concerned more with process than with product, it must also be acknowledged that there are certain periods of in the history of art when the study of process can be particularly rewarding" (258).

For those who had the privilege of knowing him, John's conversation had the intellectual sophistication and rich knowledge that marked his books. I never left one of our meetings without being aware of how honored I was by his friendship.

Gregory Leadbetter

Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence (1977)

Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence was not the first book by John Beer that I read – that was *Coleridge the Visionary*, which also happened to be the first book that I read about Coleridge, aged seventeen, when studying his poems for A-Level—but it is the book that really confirmed and quickened me on the path that has led me (circuitously) to have the pleasure and honour of writing this brief tribute.

The title alone was enough to excite the intuitions that for me were then germinating around each of its elements: *Coleridge*, *poetic*, *intelligence*. It implicitly contends that poetry itself involves a particular order of intelligence, that intelligence itself is poetic in a fundamental way—and, of course, that studying Coleridge might reveal something significant in relation to both.

It did not disappoint. John argues compellingly that Coleridge's 'social and political interests were accompanied by an undercurrent of compulsive esoteric speculation and research into the more mysterious elements of human nature'. In particular, the book focuses on Coleridge's thinking on human consciousness, organic life, and the relationship between the two: the enigmatic correspondence between our habitat and the reality of our inner lives. John tracks Coleridge as he explores 'the operation of the power of life itself in the human being' and 'the transforming power of vitalised human perceptions –

which in turn corresponded to powers actually at work everywhere in animated nature'. John's emphasis is on the early Coleridge, and the importance of his work and reading in those years with regard to his entire achievement – as well as its sometimes fugitive persistence in his later writings. John makes the important point that the characteristic principles of Coleridge's metaphysics were already established – in markedly sensuous and imaginative ways – in advance of his immersion in far more theoretical matter during his visit to Germany and thereafter.

John is extraordinarily sensitive to the ways that Coleridge's imagery can disclose a distinct fabric of ideas that cannot be adequately approached except in and through that imagery. In turn, he throws light on the relationship between poetry, thinking, and feeling – and helps to show why the art of poetry, in particular, was so vital to Coleridge. *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* is a lucid companion to some of the most curious and characteristic pathways in Coleridge's writing – from the early notebook entry on the 'first smile' of a baby and 'what kind of *reason* it displays' (CN I 330), to the workings of the imagination as the 'true inward Creatrix' (CN III 4046). He brings new insights to familiar poems: 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is read as 'a subtle psychodrama, exposing the inner forces of human mental organisation'; 'Kubla Khan' is read as 'a simulacrum of Coleridge's poetic intelligence'. Extending his argument to Coleridge's relationship with Wordsworth, John suggests that 'Coleridge's presence was vital to the activity of Wordsworth's creative powers by reasons of his ability, by vivid speculations, to create an aura of possible magic about the natural world and prompt new ways of looking back at his own experience'. Applying his findings to the later Coleridge, John sees in his work an 'esoteric trinitarianism' in which the Trinity comprised 'a paradigm of creative intelligence', while a pivotal chapter examines Coleridge's speculations on 'double touch' and 'single touch' in relation to 'primary consciousness': the point at which consciousness and the powers of organic life connect most affectively and potently, as the copula at the root of heightened perception and creative power.

These few examples highlight John's ability to pick up what feels like the very scent of Coleridge's curiosity and follow it, producing a guide both to the patterns of the living world, the philosophical inheritance and the esoterica – from sympathetic magic to animal magnetism – that so fascinated Coleridge. In doing so, John brings the very process of that fascination to life. It is an imaginative criticism, content to set 'system' to one side and live with the endlessly productive gifts of suggestiveness, analogy, and relationship – conveying to his readers 'A livelier impulse and a dance of thought' – which in turn shows something of what John had learned from Coleridge.

Composed in his temperate but quietly assertive prose, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* shows John at the height of his powers, and lies at the heart of his work on Coleridge. As humane as it is learned, it can be read – as Coleridge said a poem should aspire to be read – not just for its conclusions (despite their lasting value), but for the pleasure of the journey itself: the poetry and the

energy of John's intelligence.

James Engell

An Overlooked Enterprise

John seems to have been interested in just about everything that Coleridge was—perhaps the highest tribute one can pay to any Coleridgean, and John always said something intelligent and lasting about those interests. He saw the full dimensions of Coleridge's achievement in prose and verse, his unique qualities as a poet, his play of intellect, his religious sensibility, and his intellectual influence. John's work is filled with the kind of detail that enriches any fine scholar's work, yet such detail is particularly difficult to unearth and put in order when it comes to a mind, as Coleridge's was (by his own description), of "excessive *productivity*." John's earliest short piece on the Great Circulating Library from which Coleridge borrowed while at Christ's Hospital led me to further research on that topic, and what I found corroborated and extended what John had thought. I admire his project of publishing Coleridge in readable volumes organized by major topic and subject matter (*Coleridge's Responses*), something admirable that the Collected Works doesn't achieve. That project is easy to overlook; it doesn't appear on his list of publications because he was general editor, not editor of one of the volumes (Seamus Perry, Anthony Harding, and Samantha Harvey). John's work on Blake and Wordsworth, on Lawrence and Forster—his immense range—reminds me of Douglas Bush, who set a standard of breadth, erudition, and insight I thought hard to match, until John did so. Well, that's not quite right; it *is* hard to match, increasingly hard, and only John and a few others have done so. The editing of *Aids to Reflection* for the Collected Works is remarkable, a Platonic ideal of what an edition should be. How difficult a task it was, and how completely done.

Seamus Perry

Against Finality (1993) and *S. T. Coleridge—Poems* (1963-1999)

In tune with Coleridge's favourite maxim that opposites meet, John Beer did not give his inaugural lecture as Professor of English Literature in the University of Cambridge, which he was elected in 1987, until 1993, almost at the moment he was about retire from the Chair: it is good to know that you can do that sort of thing at Coleridge's university. The lecture was entitled *Against Finality*, and the University Press subsequently published it as a pamphlet, probably quite hard to locate now, but well worth the search as it is a brilliant piece, an example of John at his most ranging and wittiest, including,

among other things, a ringing defence of the word, and the idea of, 'perhaps'. A principle of John Beer's scholarship was to open things up rather than close them down, and, as he accounted for himself in his inaugural-*cum*-valedictory, his long career (which still had a good twenty-five productive years more to go) had dedicated itself especially to writers 'who combined their acceptance of brute fact with the keeping of a mind open to every possibility'. 'The grand Perhaps', in Browning's grand phrase, was always his subject; and Coleridge, who celebrated the sublime spectacle of the mind hovering between two images, was naturally his greatest and most compelling subject.

The spirit of that possible hovering genius informs all his critical writings, as his admirers will know; but it is also at work in perhaps his most widely read book, and not the least of his masterpieces, the Everyman edition of Coleridge's poems. First published in 1963, the edition grew in successive iterations until reaching its full achievement in 1999. E. H. Coleridge's great 1912 Oxford edition had listed innumerable variants in the footnotes, but the Beer Everyman vividly conveyed for the first time, really, the sense of Coleridge as a poet of imaginative possibility, not only possibility as a theme to be discussed in the book's exemplary introductory essays—which drew on *Coleridge the Visionary* (1959)—but also as shown in the editorial decisions that Beer made. The eclecticism of the edition is full of judicious decision: it is, on Coleridge's own advice, broadly chronological in its organisation; but the volume of 1796 is anachronistically presented in its original form as something with 'a particular intrinsic interest'; and 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan' are both presented in parallel text, as is 'Dejection: An Ode' and 'Letter to Sara Hutchinson'. The edition eloquently conveys the idea that Coleridge's poems were always themselves and yet contained the possibility of being something different too. (And there was a brilliantly controversial choice: 'The Barberry-Tree, An Attempt at Genuine Poetry' which Jonathan Wordsworth confidently ascribed to Wordsworth, was no less plausibly attributed in this book to Coleridge.)

The interpretative essays really are superb exercises in commentary; they should be quoted more often in the literature, I think. Coleridge in 'The Ancient Mariner' is said to be 'caught between the attractions of a set of doctrines that gave an imaginative interpretation of human experience and a more sceptical self which could sympathize with those who read the poem simply as a dramatization of the self-contradictory nature of the universe': how well that captures the alternative possibilities that the great poem somehow keeps equally in play. John Beer was expertly absorbed by Coleridge's intricate, self-interrogative world of doctrine and theory, but, unlike some scholars, he always remained alert to the sheerly vivid, grabbing poetic fact of the great poems – what mattered was both 'the meaning' and 'the wording', as he memorably says in the prefatory essay to 'Kubla Khan'. I admire greatly a sentence from his introduction to the Everyman, which implies a whole realm of unphilosophical response that accompanied this most philosophical of poets throughout his long and amazing life: 'The most characteristic note of

Coleridge's voice – that of eager delight – is never far below the surface of his most imaginative poetry'. There has been no better guide to his poetic genius.

Anthony Harding

John Beer on William Wordsworth

The best of the Wordsworth criticism that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, and remains vital now, is infused with a sense of mission, of something important at stake, that may puzzle more sceptical readers today. Geoffrey Hartman's *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (1964), Jonathan Wordsworth's *The Music of Humanity* (1969), and John Beer's major monographs, *Wordsworth and the Human Heart* (1978) and *Wordsworth In Time* (1979), have this in common, despite their differences: they are all aware of being addressed to a profoundly damaged world. These scholars had lived through World War II and witnessed the utter devastation of Europe. They looked to writers of the Romantic period, especially Wordsworth and Blake, to chart a way out of the moral and spiritual hopelessness that might otherwise have seemed inescapable for anyone born between 1920 and 1950. As historian Tony Judt puts it, "Europeans *felt* hopeless . . . and for good reason."[1] It is telling, and not entirely a coincidence, that Beer's *Wordsworth In Time* appeared in the same year as William Golding's strangest and most disturbing novel, *Darkness Visible*.

In Beer's two monographs, Wordsworth is presented as a poet who has much to offer any reader who doubts whether poetry of the Romantic period can speak to the crises of today. His Wordsworth has witnessed the worst that man can do to man, *and yet* has found within himself, and his experience of the natural world, some reason to hope. Beer reads Wordsworth with deep sympathy and seriousness: not necessarily trusting the text, or rather its surface meaning, at every point, but certainly trusting the poet. Indeed, he explicitly sets this down as his chosen approach. Comparing the challenges of achieving a "sympathetic" reading of Blake with those facing the sympathetic reader of Wordsworth, he warns that in reading Wordsworth, one must "either ignore the *indirect* utterance entirely," or commit oneself to "an attempted evaluation of hints, yearnings and hauntings which are only half present in the text." Wordsworth's poetry is often shadowed by an "undertone," or alternative projection, that hints at powerful presences not directly expressed in the text. Beer traces the origins of this phenomenon to the poet's psychic history, that of "a man who has known some of the same visionary experiences as Blake, yet has withdrawn from them – not without an occasional spasm of fear" (*Wordsworth In Time*, 21 [emphasis added]).

A similar sensitivity to the psychic and emotional complexities that such a

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[1] *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (Penguin, 2005), 13.

poet must confront at every turn is apparent in Beer's remark about the closing lines of the "Intimations" Ode: "he could not, in all honesty, dismiss . . . these continuing intimations that such common links might prove, after all, to be underpinned and guaranteed by the existence of a 'one life' in which all human beings were, to a degree little guessed at by most, participants" (*Wordsworth and the Human Heart*, 112). The phrase "in all honesty" shows something of Beer's wish to understand Wordsworth on his own terms. And the whole passage, from the conclusion of what remains one of the best discussions of the "Ode," demonstrates the need to keep in focus the private or solitary Wordsworth while considering his humanitarian or "political" side; and conversely, to remember that this was a poet who dearly wished always to speak to men, not to sequester himself in a safe rural retreat. The great value of *Wordsworth and the Human Heart* as a treatment of Wordsworth's insights into the human affections is that it achieves this "both-and" combination, respecting the integrity of Wordsworth's search for inward balance while also giving full rein to the humanitarianism that is a constant in his poetry, from the Salisbury Plain poems to *The Excursion* and beyond. "A full understanding of his poetry can hardly be reached," Beer argues, "without an understanding that it is created in face of the extremes which lie beyond normal experiences, threatening humanity" (14-15).

Some of these extremes encompass the sublime in nature, which can induce feelings of terror and emptiness, but may also on occasion fill the onlooker with joy and exaltation, as the Pedlar is entranced when he beholds the clouds touched with sunlight. Equally, however, some are located in the social realm, when the poet confronts the condition of those who, like Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*, were progressively deprived of every relationship that could make life meaningful ("the facts of solitude and suffering," as Beer puts it in *Romanticism, Revolution and Language* [2009]). The first few chapters of *Wordsworth and the Human Heart* therefore take as their focus the "turning point" that came in 1793, when Wordsworth, already aware of the hardening of political views that had taken place among his former colleagues in France, and having witnessed his countrymen preparing for war, found himself journeying across Salisbury Plain and talking to cottage-dwellers, beggars and outcasts, as he had once talked to the solitary men and women walking the paths and tracks of the Lake District.

The first attempts to work out the implications of this personal crisis in his own life, which reflected the crisis in English social and political life, were the Salisbury Plain poems and the 1795 draft of *The Borderers*. But, as Beer convincingly argues, both emotionally and intellectually Wordsworth needed to rebuild relations with some beloved companions, before he could move beyond the increased sense of isolation, and the accompanying tendency towards the "sardonic" in his writing, that his experiences in France, and enforced return to England, had imposed on him. The first companion he turned to in this process was of course his sister, and Beer's treatment of this relationship shows remarkable delicacy and sympathetic insight. Of this

juncture in Wordsworth's life he writes, in *Wordsworth In Time*, "[Dorothy's] own openness of heart, which kept in being his feeling for humanity, ensured a future course, not through the oppositions of rationalism (which might have resulted in further sterilities of the sardonic) but through the polarized forces of his own feelings" (48). Such a claim is sufficiently supported by Wordsworth's own testimony, but Beer is also astute enough to see that Dorothy would be a crucial fellow-labourer for another reason. If he planned to make public his claim to have sensed a "link of life between all animated beings," he would need to show that this possibility of moving from an initial self-regarding "wildness" into "reconciliation with the rest of mankind" could be duplicated in others (*Wordsworth and the Human Heart*, 77, 78).

The other crucial companion, catalyst, and "fellow-labourer" was Coleridge, who brought not only his native ebullience (and lavish praise for the version of "Salisbury Plain" he heard Wordsworth read at Bristol in 1795), but a wealth of philosophical ideas and speculations that seemed to offer support for Wordsworth's own sense that human beings were linked to each other and to nature in ways that few of their contemporaries had appreciated. For this reason, the two Wordsworth monographs need to be read in tandem with *Coleridge the Visionary* and *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence*, forming together a quartet of books that map the thought-world of the poets, and their relationships with their contemporaries, with a thoroughness rarely matched in subsequent scholarship.

It would be wrong to end this account without mentioning *Providence and Love* (1998) and *Romanticism, Revolution and Language* (2009), both of which argue for the centrality of Wordsworth in helping later writers navigate their way through the roiling controversies of their time: the Oxford Movement, Darwinism, disputes about the truth of the Bible, democratic reform. In the 1790s, Beer points out, Wordsworth in his visits to France and subsequently was "trying to come to terms with a civilization from which its traditional underpinnings of Christian philosophy had apparently been removed" (*Romanticism, Revolution and Language*, 68). For novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot, and thinkers such as Arnold, Ruskin, and the leading Cambridge intellectual F. W. H. Myers, Wordsworth was preeminently what William Ellery Channing had called him, "the poet of humanity" (*Providence and Love*, 115). No critic has shown the value of that claim more fully or convincingly than John Beer.

Jim Mays

The Coleridgean's Friend

John Beer was my good friend for many years, but he was self-effacing and we talked more about our common interest in Coleridge than about personal things or the state of the nation. His first book, *Coleridge the Visionary* (1959),

has a place in the history of Coleridge's reputation because it revived scholarly interest in Coleridge's three best-known poems such as it had not enjoyed since the appearance of Lowes's *Road to Xanadu*. His 1963 edition of *Coleridge Poems* was the most dependable and most available text in its successively revised and improved forms on this side of the Atlantic for nearly half a century. He was named editor of *Aids to Reflection* at the very beginning of the Collected Coleridge project, back in 1960, and the monumental volume that appeared in 1993 is a testament to his care and thought. It is the foundation of the new Coleridge presently being discovered by those who think about Coleridge's writing during the 1820s.

Most of all, however, and notwithstanding, all John's other writing—on Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake, and also modern authors—I think of him as one who always made himself available to the good cause. He must have supervised and examined more doctoral dissertations on Coleridge than any university teacher in England during his time, many of them to be published later by grateful students. He went everywhere to deliver talks and lectures at all levels on Coleridge and his circle; I mean, not only throughout the UK but throughout Europe and Asia in particular. He was active in the 1972 bicentenary celebrations and he wrote contributions to journals, and letters to newspapers, on matters major and minor. He was a familiar and available figure at conferences and celebratory occasions, more knowledgeable than any of us. To my mind he was a one-man Friend of Coleridge for thirty and more years before the Friends established their meetings at Nether Stowey. He was a constant resource and encouragement; he helped things along and made things happen; he was the best Friend Coleridge had in these islands in his time. R.I.P.

Felicity James

John Beer and Charles Lamb

When Graham and Jeff asked me to write this piece I immediately thought of the John Beer I'd first met – not the friendly, kind, and attentive person I would later encounter, but the astute, allusive voice of the articles in the *Charles Lamb Bulletin* I read when I was a postgraduate student. I vividly remember standing in the cork tiled aisles of the Oxford English Faculty Library with a stack of flat grey Bulletins, reading through pieces like 'Coleridge and Lamb: The Central Themes' (*Charles Lamb Bulletin* 14, 109-23). A dutiful sort of title, which belies the way in which that article opens out into a streamy imaginative journey through the friends' shared language of friendship across their lifetimes. John Beer analyses the 'images of crispness and lucency and gentle flowing' which run through their poetry and letters; the echoes of sixteenth- and seventeenth- century reading which shape their attitudes towards one another; in short, the creation, over many years, of a 'common sensibility' between the two men.

This article was just one of John's many returns to Charles Lamb over his writing life. An awareness of Lamb as friend and influence runs through his larger studies, especially in *Coleridge the Visionary* and *Coleridge's Play of Mind*. But it's his articles in the *Charles Lamb Bulletin* which I particularly want to remember here, since, taken together, they represent a real contribution to Lamb scholarship and to our understanding of the dynamics of creativity and friendship. Scattered across more than thirty years, the *Bulletin* articles give a keen insight into the psychological and literary nuances of the Coleridge-Lamb relationship, often tracing unexpected allusions or unacknowledged shared readings. In my opening example, 'The Central Themes' takes as its starting point Lamb's essay on Coleridge, 'Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago', and its portrait of Coleridge declaiming in the school cloisters, still 'in the day-spring of thy fancies, with hope like a fiery column before thee.' 'Day-spring': that word leads John to draw out what Lamb might be half-remembering there, the subtitle of Jacob Boehme's book *Aurora: That is, the Day-Spring*, and to look forward, too, to 'Coleridge's use of the same Exodus-motif in the *Biographia* to describe his debt to Boehme'.

There is a constant back and forth of allusion which takes on its own rhythm, as when Lamb quotes from Coleridge's 'Ode to the Departing Year' in the Elia essay 'New Year's Eve', and follows it up 'with a further, more involved reference to his friend' with the quotation 'the sweet assurance of a look'. This phrase comes from a poem about Philip Sidney, which Lamb presumed to be by Fulke Greville. John then beautifully builds up a sort of emotional analogy between Sidney and Greville, one-time schoolmates, and the Christ's Hospital contemporaries, Coleridge and Lamb, exploring the way in which both men might have used that earlier literary relationship to express deep emotions in their own friendship – as well as an 'element of shared roguery'. Thus the article shows how a rich shared language of reading and friendship might gradually evolve, as verbal echoes and images are passed back and forth across years of writing. Moreover, John was always alert to the sensuous qualities of this shared language, pointing out how Coleridge's pleasure in reading old folios by firelight or eating fowls in white sauce, vividly recorded in his Notebooks, then finds a parallel in the pleasurable corporeality of 'New Year's Eve'.

I have gone into detail about this early piece because it's the one which informed my own approach as a postgraduate student, both in its deep feeling for the power of shared reading, and its own readability. But John's investigation of Lamb's creativity continued over many years, set alongside his readings of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Blake, and implicitly making a claim for the significance of Lamb as Romantic writer. His writing also showed a psychological acuity about the dynamics of friendship. In 'Did Lamb understand Coleridge?' (*CLB* 56 [1986]: 232-49), we see Lamb 'resenting and resisting a certain moral unctuousness on Coleridge's part', but at the same time functioning as his keenest, most insightful critic; in 'Lamb and Wordsworth's 'Patronage' (*CLB* 100 [1997]: 133-34) we see Lamb in punning

mode puncturing the statesman-like dignity of the elder Wordsworth. In *Coleridge's Play of Mind* John quotes Coleridge's comment that 'Lamb every now and then *eradiates*' (208), and this is a good clue as to what he found so perpetually interesting about Lamb – both Lamb's own flashes of penetrating insight, and the illumination he sheds on others. John also admired the eclectic range of Lamb's reading, from Jacobean plays to Quarles's meditations: his 2001 toast to the Charles Lamb Society birthday dinner, 'Why Were Buncle's Eyes Closed?' (*Charles Lamb Bulletin,* 115 [2001]: 70-71), for instance, celebrates Lamb's fondness for Thomas Amory's eccentric Unitarian novel *John Buncle*, where wives die off by the dozen, to be mourned, briefly, by Buncle's closed eyes. This is the backdrop to the Elia essay 'The Two Races of Men', in which Buncle is left 'a widower-volume' after Coleridge's depredations: John captures how the affectionate allusion is both a shared joke with and a sly critique of Coleridge as reader.

Moreover, those birthday toasts remind us that John honoured the Elian spirit of friendship, conviviality and warmth by being a staunch supporter of the Charles Lamb Society for very many years, acting as President from 1989 to 2002. His essays and talks on Lamb are now freely available online at www.charleslambsociety.com: I trust they will be read and enjoyed for many years to come.

Jeffrey Barbeau

Aids to Reflection (1993)

The appearance of John Beer's edition of *Aids to Reflection* (1993) for the Collected Coleridge (CC) was a landmark achievement in Coleridge studies and John Beer's career alike. Thomas McFarland, no stranger to Coleridgeans, assessed the significance of the book for the *Times Literary Supplement*: 'This new edition should not only restore the work at least to scholarly attention, but should prove definitive as well'. McFarland praised *AR* as a work of 'ragged brilliance' and 'incalculable influence', but paired such accolades with equal acclaim for the editor's own virtuoso accomplishment: 'It crowns the long and distinguished career of John Beer as one of Britain's pre-eminent scholars of Romanticism.'[2]

As readers of *The Coleridge Bulletin* undoubtedly know, *Aids to Reflection* was among the most influential works in STC's corpus during the nineteenth century.[3] Coleridge originally planned the project as a simple collection of excerpts from the writings of the seventeenth-century divine Archbishop Robert Leighton. Eventually, not only Leighton but other religious luminaries

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[2] Thomas McFarland, 'Shoring Up the Self', *Times Literary Supplement,* issue 4759 (Friday, June 17, 1994), 3.

[3] Frederick Burwick, reviewing Beer's edition for *The Wordsworth Circle*, explains further: '*Aids to Reflection* is not only the volume that is indispensable to those who wish to understand Coleridge's religious thought, it is also the volume that best explains why his theological inquiry remained throughout his career central to his speculations into virtually every other aspect of human experience' (Review of *Aids to Reflection [CC]*, *The Wordsworth Circle* 25 [1994]: 227).

such as Jeremy Taylor and Richard Field had made their way into Coleridge's collection of aphorisms, but increasingly his own insightful commentary came to outweigh them all. Writing ostensibly for those who wished to discipline the mind in 'habits of reflection', Coleridge proposed nothing less than the establishment of the use of language, the character of religion, and "a full and consistent Scheme of the Christian dispensation' (AR 8). It's little surprise that *Aids to Reflection* eventually came to be known more for its philosophical method than the precise explication of certain beliefs and concepts. The form suited Coleridge perfectly, and *Aids to Reflection* contains some of the STC's most celebrated passages:

> *He, who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving his own Sect or Church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all.* (AR 107).
>
> *There is small chance of Truth at the goal where there is not a childlike Humility at the Starting-post.* (AR 192)
>
> *Christianity is not a Theory, or a Speculation; but a* Life. *Not a* Philosophy *of Life, but a Life and a living Process.* (AR 202)

The public welcomed Coleridge's book with outstretched arms, authenticating his reputation as a leading intellectual of the times. After James Marsh published the first edition of *AR* in America, sales for the book skyrocketed and the shelves of New England bookstores could barely keep copies in stock for eager New England seminarians. Not long before his death, Coleridge spoke of his newfound celebrity: "I am a poor poet in England, but I am a great philosopher in America" (AR cccviii).

Editors have published more than a dozen new editions of *Aids to Reflection* since its first appearance. Marsh's American edition, with its influential 'Preliminary Essay' (1829), is unquestionably the most far reaching, but the American editions by John McVickar (1839) and W. G. T. Shedd (1853) also introduced Coleridge to new readers, recasting Coleridge's religious thought for new audiences in the process.[4] In England, no other edition proved as significant as those produced in 1825 and 1831 (the latter used as the basis for Beer's edition). Even the two 1840s editions brought out by Sara Coleridge and her husband, with Sara's daunting essay 'On Rationalism' appended in homage, did little more than heighten the consensus that Coleridge ranked among the leading intellectuals of the day.

This brief history provides some context for assessing John Beer's *Aids to Reflection* (1993). Beer's learned "Introduction" proceeds logically through the development of Coleridge's religious thought, the formation of the work in its various iterations, and its reception in England, America, and beyond. In little more than 100 pages, Beer provides one of the clearest surveys of Coleridge's later philosophical theology and subsequent reception. Of course, that's not all.

[4] Beer's edition contains Marsh's entire 'Preliminary Essay' as 'Editor's Appendix F' (AR 489–529), and provides a complete list of editions and reprints in 'Appendix H' (AR 545–47).

As with other volumes in the CC, Beer's detailed footnotes not only provide a complete critical guide to the 1825 and 1831 editions, but also develop a wide range of philosophical, literary, and historical references, tracing Coleridge's sources and dialogue partners through a text as complex as any other in fifty volumes of the complete works. As if Beer's appendixes weren't already enough—with detailed accounts of extant manuscripts, subsequent editions, annotated and inscribed copies, related extracts, and further remarks on topics of theological and philosophical interest—he also provides more than twenty extended notes on Coleridge's thought for closer examination. Each of these learned commentaries—ranging from critical discussions of the Logos, Indian religion, and the 'Abyss of Being', to a fascinating consideration of the classical conception of 'Agonistes'—could easily have been published elsewhere in other scholarly contexts. Yet their discreet inclusion within the appendixes (much in the tradition of Coleridge's beloved daughter) yields the unmistakable impression that Beer's devotion to Coleridge far outweighed his own desire for praise.

John Beer's edition of *Aids to Reflection* (1993) will remain definitive for many years to come—not least because the editor was 'one of Britain's pre-eminent scholars of Romanticism'. As a graduate student many years ago, I learned immensely from his labor. In the language of religious communities, I might even suggest I was unknowingly 'formed' by his tutelage. The first volume in the CC that I read from cover to cover, Beer's edition left me awestruck and inspired by such a painstaking display of genius. As the final paragraphs of the 'Editor's Introduction' make clear, *Aids to Reflection* wasn't merely a work of antique interest, but even a book that might contribute to dialogue in the present age through its vivid exploration of the tensions and contradictions at the heart of modernity—ultimately justifying such an 'intricate and extensive' edition (AR cxlix) for the benefit of those who press on.

Graham Davidson

Providence and Love (1998)

The first chapter, 'Providence Displaced', opens with a glimpse of Gwendolen Harleth where Deronda first saw her—at the gaming table. We therefore expect a study of providence displaced by chance, and our expectations are initially met by a delightfully confident survey of eighteenth century attitudes to providence, 'the centrality of its position… clear from *Tom Jones*, (1749) where the heroine Sophia Western becomes virtually its Platonic representative' (3). Doubts soon creep in of course, and what is providence to the faithful and the credulous is chance to the faithless and the sceptical—thus *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67). However, providence is not so easily displaced, even by George Eliot, and Beer acknowledges its continued power or presence in some form, and in some minds (there is a fascinating riff

on *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*), right up to the point where the book ends, in 1900 with the death of Ruskin.

His thesis is that the idea of providence, in disturbed and reflective minds, is reconsidered through the experience of love. This is substantiated by the study of three key relationships, that of Wordsworth with Lucy, of Frederic Myers with Annie Marshall, and of John Ruskin with Rose La Touche. That common thread, how each of these men, in the light of their love, understood the interaction of providence and a nature not self-evidently benevolent—sometimes even 'a universe of death' (*1850* XIV 160; 35)—is wound into two rather more upsetting threads: that these girls—as they were or thought themselves to be—all died young, two of them touched with madness, Annie Marshall committing suicide while severely depressed, and Rose La Touche of untreatable anorexia.

To what degree the men were responsible for these deaths is the tacit but not the central question behind Beer's study. Rather, the 'advent of even one such person' in whom 'a spirit of natural beauty… seemed to speak… in accents of beneficence… could be regarded as, literally, providential' (30). Yet, one might argue, with the partial exception of Wordsworth, these relationships are marginal to the achievements of the men involved, and hardly deserve a full-length study. It is one of the remarkable successes of this book that as we reach its conclusion, and without having been offered a study of the works for which these men and their age are best known, we feel that we have arrived at insights central to the nineteenth century, with all its semi-spiritual, semi-materialistic propensities.

Along the way it is full of wonderful reflections, and some counter-intuitive oddities. The oddest is that assumed above, that Lucy was an actual person, whom Wordsworth had known, and who died young, before he re-met his sister. This is the subject of the second chapter, 'Wordsworth's "Lucy": Fiction or Fact' and, added to the Appendix, 'Identifying Lucy?', makes it, just, at 80 pages, the longest section of the book. This is a lot of space to give to countering the standard view that Lucy was an imagined figure, allowing him to expand or transfigure thoughts and feelings growing out of his relationship with Dorothy. Coleridge made a critically dull but soundly common-sense remark about 'A slumber did my spirit seal', the earliest of the Lucy poems: 'Most probably, in some gloomier moment he had fancied the moment in which his Sister might die' (CL I 479). This really should set the tone for our understanding of these poems, for plenty of other evidence points to the association, if not the identification, of Dorothy with Lucy. But in his determination to find Lucy's 'factuality' (37), Beer notes the very different characteristics attributed to Lucy and known of Dorothy (58-9). This leads to the suggestion as disturbing as it is interesting that through those poems Wordsworth might have been encouraging Dorothy, a 'termagant' in her words, to be 'a kind of Lucy-surrogate' (64), demure and graceful: 'The more he could assimilate the dead Lucy to the living Dorothy the more possible it became to reconcile himself to her loss… The link between Nature and

Providence could thus be rescued' (65).

And if there was a real Lucy, this also aligns Wordsworth's relationship much more closely to those of Myers and Ruskin, and though not said so directly, the suffering of their women would thus be linked to Dorothy's suffering, and the suffering of all given a providential purpose. For, in George Eliot's words (134-5) the Victorians were struggling with 'the inspiring trumpet calls' of '*God*, *Immortality, Duty*'. In the Fellows' Garden of Trinity she dismissed the first as 'inconceivable', the second as 'unbelievable' and thus left only the third to stand, Kantian and Wordsworthian in spirit (though that, for me, is indicative of the age's mis-reading of Wordsworth). Finding the grounds of hope impossible to abandon, Myers set up the The Society for Psychical Research, seeking to rescue at least the second trumpet, and Ruskin joined in, credulous and sceptical by turns. But this depended on calling back spirits from beyond the grave (expressly banned by Wordsworth in 'Laodamia') and thus séances and spiritualism and so forth. In the end it all came to nothing, despite some exciting moments. But not quite nothing in John Beer's view: *Praeterita* was a 'marvellous and unlooked for outcome' (311), the providential rediscovered through memory (312).

One admiring critic thought this a slightly whacky book. It is, asking many unanswered questions of matters that may not now seem to matter. But at the very moment of thinking that, one thinks of all the other relationships that might speak of a providential order, especially of Coleridge's love for Sara Hutchinson, through whom he felt all nature came alive, in whom all things would live from pole to pole, a relationship at the heart of one of his greatest poems. And then, Yeats, and Maud Gonne, and spiritualism, and automatic writing, and all the effort to find a centre that would hold. And afterwards, Eliot, the hyacinth girl, and Madame Blavatsky, and haruspicating and scrying, the nineteenth century echoes still reverberating in a twentieth-century poet. But, most significantly, reversing George Eliot's dicta uttered in the Fellows' Garden at Trinity, his finding immortality in a Gloucestershire garden in the company of a woman to whom he wrote hundreds if not thousands of letters, and whose long-held hopes of marriage he finally destroyed, pushing her to the edge of madness. And so the story Beer tells suddenly stands at the heart of English poetry. To adopt T S Eliot's words, this is a book which will, given the chance, 'fructify in the lives of others.'

James Vigus

Romantic Consciousness: Blake to Mary Shelley (2003/2012)

The characteristic method of John Beer's criticism was to combine patient close-readings with a pursuit of his own train of thought on the deepest questions raised by the Romantics (and their successors). His was a form of practical criticism, involving rigorous thought, yet unbeholden to theory. Beer's

treatment of the concept of 'Being' in *Romantic Consciousness* is a perfect example. The authors discussed are the canonical first- and second-generation Romantics: Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, De Quincey, Mary Shelley, P. B. Shelley and Byron, as well as Tennyson and Hallam. The theme is the vital yet slippery distinction between consciousness and Being. Consciousness is that which is aware of the world, over-insistently linked to rationality in Descartes' formulation *cogito ergo sum*. Being might be considered the necessary substrate without which consciousness is unthinkable, whether this is conceived theologically as a divine ground, psychologically as the subconscious, or in Coleridgean terms as a primary level of mind. Beer's subtle approach to the speculative possibilities of the 'unobtrustive' word 'Being' (1) is absorbing and enlightening. For instance, he reconstructs the apparently scattered ideas contained in Coleridge's monologue during a chance walk with Keats in 1819: Coleridge's 'binding conception' was that poets, 'through their dealings with [the] primary consciousness, were closer to the truth of human nature than psychologists who simply analysed mental phenomena as if they existed in the human mind without any other layer. This radical view [inverted] the common ranking between the conscious and the unconscious' (56-7).

In pursuit of this topic, Beer might have compared the British writers with Hölderlin or Novalis; he might have looked forward to Heidegger, or backwards to Böhme. Instead, he brushes aside the German traditions (Heidegger is briefly dissected in the sequel, *Post-Romantic Consciousness*). My own German interests notwithstanding, I do not regret this. Re-reading the book, I take pleasure in discovering new connections for myself. In the fourth article in his series 'On the Philosophy of Kant' (1803), Henry Crabb Robinson recorded what he felt to be a gradually unfolded discovery about Being:

I recollect many years since, hearing a few words dropped from an avowed Platonist which were then a riddle to me but which thro' Kant are now intelligible. Someone had repeated several times the Word *Being*, as if it were understood of itself: 'You treat that little Word *Being* with little ceremony' said my Platonist 'if you knew what *is* is, you might throw away your metaphysical books'. This little word is explained by Kant only negatively, but it leads to a positive notion. That which is in *Time & Space is not* in the higher & transcendental import of the word. The only true & *absolute Being* is that whose existence is raised above all the temporal & local modifications of our sensible nature (Robinson, *Essays on Kant, Schelling, and German Aesthetics*, ed. James Vigus [London: MHRA, 2010], 46-7).

Given Robinson's exploration of these ideas, it is logical that he soon became a staunch advocate of Wordsworth's poetry and an astute critic of Coleridge's theological work. Such speculations seemed to Robinson's editor too abstruse for the readership, however, and his essay remained in manuscript.

It is striking, similarly, how many of Beer's key examples of the speculation about Being were unpublished, truncated, or otherwise fugitive. Tucked away in a remarkable appendix we find Beer's analysis of a draft section of

Wordsworth's *Prelude*, including a couplet that reads (in Beer's transcription): 'Though little child yet glorious in might / Of heavens effulgence from thy beings Light' (179). Although the corresponding passage about the child's closeness to the divine in the *Prelude* did not find favour with Coleridge, who criticised its tone as '*mental* bombast' (BL II 136, 138), that little-known draft couplet represents a point of particular intensity in Wordsworth's poetic speculation about the nature of Being. Rejecting the notion that the relationship between Coleridge and Wordsworth was predominantly conflictual, Beer persuasively suggests that the two friends' differing imaginative tendencies – Coleridge more 'intensive' in his focus, and delighting in light and energy, while Wordsworth's imagination was more 'extensive', and prone to explore darkness and fear – were complementary and mutually strengthening. It is another characteristic of Beer's literary criticism that each verbal detail or echo, however apparently minor, forms a link in a chain of thought running through the centre of Romantic discourse.

That sense of a progression of living discourse reminds me of Beer's masterly 'Afterword' to *Coleridge's Afterlives*, a collection I edited with Jane Wright in 2008, and which Beer brought to a close with his usual care and broad vision. Beer had already expounded some of the subtlest yet most important of these afterlives – in *Romantic Consciousness*. In his chapter on Tennyson and the Cambridge Apostles, Beer quotes Tennyson's lines on the languishing soul in 'The Palace of Art':

> Lest she should fail and perish utterly,
> God, before whom ever lie bare
> The abysmal deeps of Personality,
> Plagued her with sore despair. (qtd 118)

The phrase 'abysmal deeps of Personality' echoed a passage in Arthur Hallam's *Theodicaea*, which in turn drew on an esoteric 'hint' in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (AR 333-4, qtd. Beer 117), one on which Coleridge might have expanded in conversation with Cambridge Apostles such as R. J. Tennant or Hallam himself (cf. 114). It was through paths like this that Romantic and especially Coleridgean reflection on the deepest aspects of Being continued into the Victorian period and beyond. No-one other than John Beer could uncover these lines of transmission with such a combination of scholarly rigour and elegant lightness of touch.

Fred Burwick

Coleridge's Play of Mind (2010)

Beer's approach to the "play of mind" might seem to encounter a serious hindrance in its opening chapter on "the missing playground." Is it possible to play without a playground? Beer's title anticipates his argument:

Coleridge found his playground in the mind. His inward retreat Coleridge attributed to the bullying of his brother Frank and his estrangement from his other brothers. He was not athletically inclined, neither in interest nor in physical aptitude. "I never played," Coleridge admitted, "except by myself." This confession, Beer asserts, "meant that he still learned to play – through the books he read; and in that area, it might be argued, he never stopped playing."

Even in granting mental and intellectual activity as modes of play, there remained an opposing notion of moral responsibility that was upheld by rational endeavour, yet presumably neglected by the make-believe, capricious irresponsibility of play. There are ethical and aesthetic consequences. "How far," Beer asks, "could the demands of scientific investigation and logical thinking be allowed to take over the need for free play of mind and body?" Coleridge tended to attach dark feelings to those indulgences of play he considered allied to debauchery and intemperance. "Between admissions of guilt and assertions of innocence," Beer observed, "there was little room for play of mind." Worse, as Coleridge lamented in "Dejection: an Ode," each affliction "Suspends what nature gave me at my birth, / My shaping spirit of Imagination."

In Enlightenment philosophy, prior to Immanuel Kant, reason dominated the "higher faculties" and imagination was relegated to the "lower faculties." With Kant, the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) was a facility of the intuitive reason as distinguished from the discursive reason. In *A Defence of Poetry* Shelley similarly identified two thought processes: *to logizien and to poiein*. The former, as the mathematical comprehension of the world, enumerates qualities already known; the latter was the perception of the value of those quantities. The play theory developed by Friedrich Schiller in his letters on "Aesthetic Education" (1794-95) introduced the impulse of play (*Spieltrieb*) as a third basic facility of mind that freely combined the activities of the perceptual drive to gather impressions (*Stofftrieb*) and the organizational and shaping drive (*Formtrieb*). Combined solely through play, stuff and form are transformed into beauty. Beauty and play must remain uncorrupted by other interests: one should only *play* with beauty, and play *only* with beauty ("der Mensch soll mit der Schönheit nur spielen, und er soll nur mit der Schönheit spielen").

Having affirmed Coleridge's learning to play through books, Beer goes on to examine Wordsworth's critique of the consequent deprivation: Coleridge's want of interaction with nature and childhood playmates left him only "The self-created sustenance of a mind/ Debarred from Nature's living images" (*Prelude* vi:312-13). Opening with Coleridge's confession in the notebooks that he "never thought as a Child, never had the language of a Child," Beer's second chapter explores the "Fantastic Sportiveness" that arose in the stead of the natural play of childhood. Passages from Wordsworth document differences in the imagery of Coleridge's fantastic play. Coleridge is more "natural" in the subjective retreat that Beer describes in the chapter on "Dances of the Intellect and Emotions." Beer devotes several chapters to

Coleridge's direct and indirect dialogue; direct, as dialogue of personal interaction, sustained in conversation and correspondence; indirect, as registered in marginalia or notebook entries. Dialogue with books often acquires the illusion of direct discourse, whether tinged with hostile satire as in his response to Sir James Mackintosh, or with self-pitying passion as in his poems to Sara Hutchinson, or with the encouraging persuasion of a concerned mentor as in his relations with Tom Wedgwood.

Beer attributes Coleridge's strength as a critic to his imaginative play in recreating the author in the process of composition and engaging the reader in that process as well. Beer begins his analysis of an empathic mode of criticism in his chapters of journalism and *The Friend*, and describes its full expression in the lectures on Shakespeare. The chapter on "The Poet as Critic, Critic as Poet" elucidates Coleridge's method. Among Beer's examples of illusory empathy is Coleridge's account of Martin Luther translating the Bible in his hidden chamber in the Wartburg Castle. Projecting his own experiences as a translator, Coleridge recreates the well-known, possibly apocryphal, anecdote of Luther tossing his inkpot at the devil. Coleridge imagines Luther's frustration in not finding the proper word to render a crucial passage without becoming entangled in the attendant dogma of previous translations. It is at this juncture that Luther throws his inkpot at the mocking devil. Did the devil really appear, or was it a shadow or reflected light, or a "Phantom from Luther's brain." Coleridge considers writing a book on "Dreams, Visions, Ghosts, Witchcraft, &c." He acknowledges how easy is for "the Optics and Acoustics of the inner sense" to impose upon the objective perceptions, confounding reality with the play of mind.

As Beer points out, Norman Fruman in *The Damaged Archangel* (1971) cited the Luther story by Jonas Ludwig Hess as the true source and further instance of Coleridge's plagiarism. But Hess was not concerned, as Coleridge was, with making the case for "mind play." To drive his point home, Coleridge adds a personal anecdote: "A lady once asked me if I believed in ghosts and apparitions. I answered with truth and simplicity: *No, Madam! I have seen far too many myself.*" That anecdote may dismiss belief in illusion, but it does not exorcise the half-belief in the imaginary phenomena of play as a free activity functioning quite consciously alongside ordinary life, and often absorbing the player (whether reader, author, or critic) intensely and utterly.

Beer begins and ends with comments on his frontispiece, Joseph Wright of Derby's "Experiment of a Bird in an Air-Pump." Deprived of oxygen, the bird dies. The four on-lookers register different responses. His opening question dealt with rational inquiry vs. free play of mind. In his concluding reference to the painting, Beer adds Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath to the company: Hughes as critic of Coleridge; Plath in her visionary imagery and poetics of mercurial identity. Coleridge, by contrast, was "a survivor," a poet of guilt and the supernatural, nevertheless sustained by mind play.

Tim Fulford

John in Cambridge, Cannington and Snowdonia

John Beer was my PhD supervisor at Cambridge: in that capacity he was quietly encouraging—perhaps more quiet than I would have liked. This mode, I later felt, was John's way of moving through what was then a contentious and noisy English Faculty. He carried on below the controversy, seemingly oblivious to the fractious politicking of others. His reticence, I came to think, allowed him to continue a way of being an intellectual that valued enquiry and exploration above criticism and opinion. John, I realised, taught me not by challenge or debate, but by example—he illuminated writers' ways of thinking by investigating things others thought unimportant because they led to no theoretical or critical position. This was certainly unfashionable; it was also refreshingly unegotistical: John needed no group of acolytes to establish his importance in his own – or others' – eyes. There was no School of Beer, though he would brandish an outsized teapot at the research seminars he hosted in the beautiful upper room on Fen Causeway. He had a knack at these gatherings of sleeping, or seeming to sleep, through the presentation, only to ask the salient question afterwards.

John avoided compliments as he did controversy: he was far too modest to want to identify his knowledge as his own. This made its pursuit possible for his students: it also communicated a model of open, rather than possessive, scholarship—the pleasure to be found in having, without setting out to do so, prompted discovery in others. I think all of us who were taught by him felt this, though we may not have understood it till later. Often we didn't even realise we had John's teaching in common: I've more than once felt a gentle shock of mild surprise to discover that someone whose work I like was a fellow student, back in the day. The discovery is always followed by mutual acknowledgement that somehow, without our noticing it, our work seems to have gone in a more Beerian direction than we ever intended.

Walking to the pub was part of the next stage of my friendship with John. It was at the Coleridge Conference, long after I'd finished my PhD, that I really got to know him. On foot, pacing steadily across Exmoor, he was the best kind of companion, always alive to the landscape, content to talk or to enjoy silently. I discovered an unexpected wry humour – as when, after trudging many miles accompanied by a stray sheepdog who seemed to form an attachment to us, we arrived, muddy and exhausted, at Molland, to see, in the churchyard, gravestone after gravestone commemorating one or another Beer. "I thought this was where I would end up," said John.

Exhaustion was, I now see, a theme: in 1995 I led him over the whole Snowdon horseshoe, certainly a peak or two too far. John, seventy years old, became slower and slower; and began to crawl up the rocky peaks on hands, while I, regretting the foolish optimism of youth, waited at the summits. When

we finally got back to the car, he sat wearily down and said, with a vehemence I did not associate with him, 'I have never been so tired in my whole life'. It was then that he opened the can of Fanta that had been jiggling in his rucksack all day. It exploded all over him. He merely sighed, deeply, and we drove off.

John didn't make a fuss—not then, and not when we threw a surprise dinner in Cambridge to give him his festschrift. He beamed happiness though, and even seemed to enjoy the fact that, in the bibliography I had compiled of his work, I had managed to father upon him several articles on social psychology that had been written by another John Beer altogether. He was of course too gentle to point out the error to me: I found out months later.

Part of not making a fuss was not being effusive, especially in public – not even in parading his humour. This emerged, in later years, in Coleridge conference lectures on the pursuit of the 'real' location of the Lucy poems (the Duddon valley, he suggested—so that the famous line should be 'She dwelt among untrodden ways / Beside the springs of Dud'). His lecture on the exact species of albatross that the Mariner shot was another example of a humour heard so deeply it is not heard at all—unless you already knew him. It was at that same conference that, finally, after years of hoping for a public compliment from a man who constantly shied away from being fulsome, I heard him say, after my plenary talk, 'that was the best lecture I've heard you give'. Parse it: it went past in a moment but I could have sworn the emphasis came on the 'you'….