Notes on Coleridge's Sense of Humour

A talk given at the Ottery St Mary Heritage Society's annual "Coleridge Anniversary Lunch", held on 22nd October 2011

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SPECULATING ABOUT COLERIDGE'S PERSONALITY is an excellent diversion. Float any idea, and you can be sure that somewhere in his sixty-one years of endless talk and 'fly-catching', there will be something that supports your view. Thus arguing that Coleridge was funny is not much of a challenge: there is amusement by the cartload to be had from his letters, notes and poetry, as well as from the recollections of friends and acquaintances. Easily enough, dare I say, for a minor anthology.[1] Coleridge could (still can) make you smile at his silly poems, tall tales, excruciating puns, or self-mocking personal dramas, and indeed, almost all contemporary eulogies to his brilliance make appropriate genuflexions to his wit.

But Coleridge was funny in funny ways. If you pick through the evidence, some interesting themes emerge, which I believe bring into sharper focus certain elements of the way he would present himself in public, which can help colour-in the kind of man he was, and what it was like to be in his company. That is the extent of my ambitions for this short talk—a little colouring in of some details on the various portraits that Coleridge scholars have painted over the years.

I mentioned the praise that Coleridge's humorous side attracted from his admirers. Characteristically, the knee-bending in this direction is seldom as acute as it is for his other accomplishments. Here, for example, is Joseph Cottle (STC's friend and publisher in his the late 1790's)—"Those who remember him in his more vigorous days, can bear witness to the peculiarity and transcendant power of his conversational eloquence. It was unlike anything that could be heard elsewhere; the kind was different, the degree was different, the manner was different. The boundless range of scientific knowledge, the brilliancy and exquisite nicety of illustration, the deep and ready reasoning, the strangeness and immensity of bookish lore, were not all; the dramatic story, the joke, the pun, the festivity, must be added." So most of the funny stuff is, in Cottle's view, "an addition", rather than a central feature of STC's genius.[2]

Dr. James Gillman was in-house physician and genial host for the last eighteen years of Coleridge's life. His assessment, in a reverential biography, was much the same as Cottle's—"There is one part of Coleridge's character not to be passed by, although so overlaid by his genius as rarely to be noticed, namely, his love of humour and of wit, of which he possessed so large a share. As punsters, his dear friend Lamb and himself were inimitable. […]. Coleridge was more humorous than witty in making puns—and in repartee, he was,

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[1] See *Coleridge Sauce* (Coleridge Memorial Project 2011. www.coleridgememorial.org.uk)

[2] Joseph Cottle *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey* London 1837

according to modern phraseology, 'smart and clever'."[3]

Even Charles Lamb, Coleridge's most loyal friend and admirer, carefully measured his praise of Coleridge's comic abilities. Lamb knew a thing or two about humour, having been a "comedy writer" for the Morning Post—he was obliged to invent six jokes a day (at 6d a joke!)[4]. Add to that his intimate friendship with Coleridge, and you will appreciate the weight his view carries. Here he recalls a "wit combat" between Coleridge and Charles Valentine LeGrice, with both of whom he was friends at Christ Hospital School in the 1780s, "which two I behold, like a Spanish great galleon, and an English man-of-war; Master Coleridge, like the former, was built far higher in learning, solid, but slow in his performances. C.V.L., with the English man-of-war, lesser in bulk, but lighter in sailing, could turn with all tides, tack about, and take advantage of all winds, by the quickness of his wit and invention."[5]

There are also quite a few comments that would rate as less complimentary. Hazlitt, for example, found Coleridge's wit 'heavy' [6], and De Quincey is clearly amused more by the man, rather than his attempts at humour[7], but perhaps the most coruscating assessment is that of Thomas Carlyle, who was present at some of the Highgate soirees, and who, in the main, found Coleridge's talking riffs dreary and tedious. "Coleridge was not without what talkers call wit" he writes, "and there were touches of prickly sarcasm in him […]; he had traits even of poetic humour; but in general he seemed deficient in laughter." Carlyle craved just "one right peal of concrete laughter" to rupture the "Kantean haze-world" and "air-castles" that filled the atmosphere in the parlour at the Grove. "None such ever came" he lamented.[8]

"Deficient in laughter"?—how can that be? Coleridge was always making an effort to amuse—"I laugh more, & talk more nonsense in a week, than most other people do in a year…" he tells John Thelwall, "… & I *let* puns inoffensively in the presence of grave men, who smile, like verjuice putred."[9] Well, the grave men obviously aren't falling about helplessly at STC's puns—but he doesn't seem too concerned about poor audience reaction. In fact there are occasions when he is quite content to push his luck in this way, even to the point of annoyance. In a letter to John Prior Estlin in 1796, Coleridge is excited by a sudden urge to be amusing—"I would overwhelm you with an Avalanche of Puns & Conundrums loosened by sudden thaw from the Alps of my Imagination", and as promised he sweeps us through some fairly awful jokes, starting with, "If a Woman had murdered her Cousin, and there were no other proof of her guilt except that she had an *half-barrel* Cask in her

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[3] James Gillman *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* London 1838

[4] From the Gentlemen's Magazine, published in the New York Times of 4/12/1887

[5] Quoted in *Christ's Hospital—Recollections of Lamb, Coleridge and Leigh Hunt*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson. London, 1896

[6] William Hazlitt, *Political essays, with sketches of Public Characters* London 1819

[7] Thomas De Quincey—*Coleridge And Opium-Eating* in De Quincey's Works Vol XI Edinburgh 1862. De Quincey's trashing of James Gillman's biography is cover for an attack on Coleridge's amusing stories, which Gillman faithfully recounts.

[8] From Seamus Perry's *S T Coleridge: Interviews & Recollections*, Palgrave 2002

[9] Letter to Thelwall, CL I 262.

possession—how would that convict her?—Answer: It would be evident that she had kild-er-kin." Then he pauses to pre-empt the reception he expects from Mrs Estlin… "As I know that now (Mrs Estlin) cannot mortify me by pretending not to enjoy the joke, she will laugh most intemperately…"; then, to optimise the impact of the next side-splitter, he recommends "… do not ask her the next (joke) till a quarter of an hour's intermission…". But the next comes fast on the heels of murder: 'why Satan sitting on a house-top would be like a decayed Merchant?—Answer—Because he would be **imp-over-a-shed**.'[10]

Where he scored better as a humourist was as a raconteur of unreliable personal histories. Coleridge obviously enjoyed these, and they were of a piece with contemporary humour. For that very reason De Quincey treads on them as "Joe Miller-ish" amusements.[11] The events that inform the stories are probably real enough but they are always imaginatively reworked for dramatic and humorous effect. There are plenty of examples—but one will serve as advertisement for the rest. On his tour of Wales in 1794 in the company of Joseph Hucks, Coleridge stops at an Inn and entertains the local clientele:

> At Bala is nothing remarkable except a Lake of 11 miles in circumference. At the Inn I was sore afraid, that I had caught the Itch from a Welch Democrat, who was charmed with my sentiments: he grasped my hand with flesh-bruising Ardour—and I trembled, lest some discontented Citizens of the *animalcular* Republic should have emigrated. Shortly after, into the same room a well drest clergyman, and four others—among whom (the Landlady whispers me) was a Justice of Peace and the Doctor of the Parish—I was asked for a Gentleman—I gave General Washington—The parson said in a low voice— (Republicans!)—After which the medical man said—damn Toasts! I gives a sentiment—May all Republicans be *gulloteen'd*!—Up starts the Welch Democrat—May all *Fools* be gulloteen'd—and then you will be the first! Thereon Rogue, Villain, Traitor flew thick in each other's faces as a hailstorm—This is nothing in Wales—they *make calling one another Liars* &c—necessary vent-holes to the sulphureous Fumes of the Temper! At last, I endeavored to arbitrate by observing that whatever might be our opinions in politics, the appearance of a Clergyman in the Company assured me, we were all *Christians*—tho' (continued I) it is rather difficult to reconcile the last Sentiment with the Spirit of Christianity. Pho!—quoth the Parson—Christianity! Why, we an't at Church now? Are we—The Gemman's Sentiment was a very good one—'it shewed, he was *sincere* in his principles!'—Welch Politics could not prevail over Welch Hospitality—they all except the Parson

[10] Letter to John Prior Estlin, CL I 223.

[11] Thomas De Quincey op.cit. After a popular Joke Book entitles *Joe Miller's Jests*, published in the middle of the 18th century.

> shook me by the hand, and said I was an open hearted honest-speaking Fellow, tho' I was a bit of a Democrat.[12]

Hucks' account of the same event is disappointing—the row takes place as described, but, far from intervening, he and Coleridge "soon withdrew ourselves from the scene of contention, and left the combatants to settle the point in the best manner they could".[13] Coleridge's revisions are fairly implausible, but at least he now has a part in the action, and the story improves as a result. In most of his tall tales, Coleridge puts himself centre-stage.

Even better than the stories were silly verses, and here too there are plenty of examples. In this example STC was asked to make an entry in a commonplace book—and later tells his friend J H Green what he would like to have done

> A portly Dame, whose Good man has done well for himself in the Carcase-Butcher Line, would fain have something, in the Ottigraph way, from me in the splendid Book which by a somewhat *Italianized* mode of pronunciation she calls her *Ol*bum or *Awl*bum—Would this do?
>
> Parry seeks the Polar Ridge:
> But rhymes seeks S.T.Coleridge
> Fit for Mrs Smudger's Olbum
> Or to wipe her Baby's small bum.[14]

Toilet themes are well represented in the genre…

> This Goslar Ale is stout and staunch;
> But sure 'tis brewed by Witches!
> Scarce do you feel it warm in paunch,
> 'Odsblood, 'tis in your Breeches! [15]

I think the essence of Coleridge's humour comes to life, in my mind at least, by summoning an image of the man in action in his late twenties, a compilation from the many painted and written portraits. Slightly above average height and thin (at that age), he has unkempt black shoulder length hair, a slack, fleshy lower lip below an ever open mouth with gap teeth in view.[16] His large eyes suggest a simple perplexity. Dorothy Wordsworth thinks him "plain", and her

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[12] CL I 89

[13] Joseph Hucks *A Pedestrian Tour Through North Wales* London 1795

[14] Letter to J H Green, CL VI 686

[15] *Table Talk and Omniana of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* OUP, 1917.

[16] Nearly all the portraits of Coleridge, except Allston's (Coleridge's personal favourite), show his mouth ajar and sometimes the toothy gap in view as well - but the artist has most often subtly disguised these traits in deference to the sitter.

brother William sees, 'a face divine of heaven born idiotcy'.[17] That face fits perfectly with the puns and conundrums we suffered earlier, and complements the try-hard jokes and the egocentric, boyish taste in humour.

An oddity which might well be related is Coleridge's erratic walking. It isn't mentioned a great deal but it certainly bothered Hazlitt, who describes it in detail as weaving from side to side, unable to maintain a straight course. It's a metaphor too apt to ignore, of course, but it might also point to STC's lack of awareness of social niceties. Caught up in his talk, he has 'lost track' of his companion, and of any responsibility to keep a pace and direction, convenient for the both of them. Enthusiasm compromises his ability to regulate his social conduct— he "catches fire" as his ideas run away with him.

From all of this, we might suggest that a piece is missing from Coleridge's set of social skills, a deficiency exposed in his efforts at, and taste in, humour. His friends and supporters respond to his efforts with affable tolerance. This is how you treat a child—how you react to a precocious boy making bad jokes. Those who valued Coleridge for his extraordinary talents, were prepared also to take on board the would-be humourist as part of the package. And Coleridge was, apparently, fine with that. While he was not socially inept, the range and sophistication of his social accomplishments was, I believe, limited by some indefinable qualitative difference in constitution and awareness that was, at the same time, the source of his genius. He wanted to be appreciated, to be the centre of attention—something he could do with relative ease just by talking. His inclination was to amuse, and he did certainly afford much amusement to those who knew him. But no matter how hard he tried (and he did keep trying)—his reputation as a humourist was always much diminished by his other achievements.

In conclusion, I want to make sure you go away with the right idea about Coleridge and his sense of humour. All the foregoing pays attention to the damaged part of an otherwise archangelic presence. If you buy in to the whole package, as did his friends, then his humour instantly shines more brightly. And as I am here among his friends, let me re-run a piece of quintessential Coleridge fun for you…

Having been seated beside Coleridge at a dinner of the British Association in 1833, Sir William Rowan Hamilton listened entranced to Coleridge's "sweet and wondrous stream of speech". A Coleridge devotee, Hamilton wondered whether STC remembered his visits to Highgate…

"Presuming he had forgotten those former visits of mine, which however he assured me that he had not done, I said to Coleridge on being placed beside him [ ] at Cambridge that I had read most of his published works: but by way of being very honest, I added, 'But sir, I am not sure that I understand them all. 'The question is, sir' said he, 'whether I understand them all myself.' [18]

[17] This line appeared in Wordworth's verse portrait of Coleridge, but was subsequently altered to "Heavy his low hung lip did oft appear / Deprest by weight of musing Phantasy" See Perry op.cit.

[18] From Robert Perceval Graves *Life of Sir William Rowan Hamilton*. Quoted in Perry op.cit.