'every Thing is God': Coleridge and Priestley Reconsidered

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IN MARCH 1796, COLERIDGE WONDERED, IN A LETTER TO JOHN EDWARDS:

> How is it that Dr Priestley is not an atheist?— He asserts in three different Places, that God not only *does,* but *is,* every thing.— But if God *be* every Thing, every Thing is God—: which is all, the Atheists assert—. An eating, drinking, lustful *God*— with no *unity* of *Consciousness*—these appear to me the unavoidable Inferences from his philosophy—[1]

Coleridge questions Priestley's philosophical consistency. Priestley held out the attractions of unity, but Coleridge struggles here with the pantheist implications that he finds in Priestley's writings. In Coleridge's mind, pantheism is the same as atheism, and thus unacceptable. Coleridge, however, simplifies Priestley's system with this critique. He gives little weight to Priestley's explicit rejection of pantheism. It is a less than generous reading which tries to find consistency through making Priestley into a stricter monist than his system, read as a whole, merits.

Several critical accounts have readily accepted Coleridge's partial summary, though, and have then identified Priestley as the source of a pantheistic 'Unitarianism' in Coleridge's verse. These accounts obscure the diversity of Coleridge's philosophical reading, by conflating the ideas of Priestley with those of, amongst others, Ralph Cudworth, and George Berkeley. I suggest that Coleridge's pantheistic expressions are actually the result of an attempt to synthesize Cudworth and Priestley.

In his *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777, 2nd edn. 1782) Priestley proposes to adopt the 'hypothesis' of Father Boscovich, that 'matter is not *impenetrable*, […] but that it consists of *physical points* only, endued with powers of attraction and repulsion' by which, according to Priestley, 'matter is […] resolved into nothing but the d*ivine agency*, exerted according to certain rules.'[2] It is this theory to which Priestley refers when he suggests that since 'it has been again and again admitted, that, notwithstanding the existence of solid matter, every thing is really *done* by the divine power, what material objection can there be to everything *being* the divine power' (*Disquisitions* I p.40). This passage seemingly supports Coleridge's reading that Priestley claims that 'every Thing is God'. However, Priestley maintains a distinction between God and the world, insisting that, while 'On this hypothesis, every thing is the *divine power*', yet 'every thing is not *the Deity himself*'. This is because the centres of attraction and repulsion 'are no part of *himself,* any more than the solid matter supposed to be created by him'

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[1] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956-1971), I: 1785-1806 (1956), pp.192-193.

[2] Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Birmingham: printed by Pearson and Rollason, for J. Johnson, London, 1782), I, pp.24, 39-40, hereafter *Disquisitions*.

(*Disquisitions* I p.41-2). Thomas McFarland suggests that the logic of such statements 'would amount to Spinozism.'[3] McFarland dismisses Priestley's explicit rejection of pantheism. Priestley states that it is:

> manifest that the maker of *myself*, of the *world*, and of the *universe*, […] must be a being different from myself, the world, or the universe; which is sufficient answer to the reasoning of Spinoza, who, making the *universe itself* to be God, did in fact, deny that there was any God.'
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> (*Disquisitions* I p.188)

Significantly, Priestley's criticisms of Spinoza anticipate Coleridge's criticisms of Priestley. Although it is possible to read Priestley as suggesting 'God is every thing', he explicitly denies, *contra* Coleridge, that 'every thing is God', 'the *universe itself*' does not contain the totality of God. Priestley may not be a traditional dualist, but he resists absolute monism through the maintenance of a God/world dichotomy.

Furthermore, Priestley argues that 'making the deity to *be*, as well as to *do* every thing, *in this sense*,' of material properties being His agency, is not 'any thing like the opinion of Spinoza' because, for Priestley, 'every inferior intelligent being has a consciousness distinct from that of the supreme intelligence' (*Disquisitions* I p.42). The phrase '*in this sense*' signals the qualified nature of Priestley's statement. God is not literally everything, but is essential to everything's existence. Coleridge's further accusation is that Priestley presents a God with 'no *unity* of *Consciousness*'. However, Priestley's God is 'a superior intelligence' (*Disquisitions* I p.42), who has a personal relationship with humanity in Scripture, and this, even with their shared monism, is a crucial distinction from Spinoza or pantheistic atheists, despite McFarland's assertion.

Priestley further explains that:

> Exclude the idea of deity on my hypothesis, and every thing except *space*, necessarily vanishes with it, so that the Divine Being, and his energy, are absolutely necessary to that of every other being. His power is the very *life and soul* of every thing that exists; and, strictly speaking, *without him, we ARE,* as well as, *can* DO *nothing*.[4]

It must be remembered that Priestley does not believe in the existence of the 'soul': his whole book is an argument against the idea as a corruption of Christian doctrine.[5] When Priestley says that 'His power is the very *life and soul* of every thing that exists', he is actually talking figuratively, of what is vital to life, rather than of an immaterial substance. Although matter is not inert, its powers are nevertheless directly attributable to God. This is why Priestley

[3] Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.359n.
[4] *Disquisitions* I p.42. The rhetorical similarity with some of Berkeley is striking, and is discussed further below.
[5] See especially *Disquisitions* I pp. 207-208.

claims that without God, only space could exist. His statement that 'strictly speaking, *without him, we ARE,* as well as, *can* DO *nothing*', simply establishes God as necessary for anything to exist.

In a footnote to line 34 of Book II of *Joan of Arc* (1795), Coleridge attacks the idea of aether as theorized by Newton to explain the interaction of different material objects. According to Coleridge, 'Newton's philosophy' leads to atheism because,

> if matter by any powers or properties *given* to it, can produce the order of the visible world, and even generate thought; why may it not have possessed such properties by *inherent* right? and where is the necessity of a God? matter is, according to the mechanic philosophy capable of acting most wisely and most beneficently without Wisdom or Benevolence; and what more does the Atheist assert? if matter possess those properties, why might it not have possessed them from all eternity?[6]

This critique is similar to that which Coleridge would make of Priestley in his letter to Edwards, that a materialist system abolishes the need for God. Priestley's assertion of the necessity of God to the powers of matter is thus crucial, even if intellectually unconvincing, because it acts as a defence against any accusations of atheism or deism. God is not merely responsible for the creation of powers which reside within matter, but, Priestley suggests, for the continuing operation of those powers (*Disquisitions* I p.40-1). Matter is thus not self-sufficient but requires an external, albeit divinely material, cause.

Coleridge depicts Priestley as making a distinction which cannot be maintained. He reacts to the difficulties he finds in Priestley's system by insisting upon a resolution, that 'every Thing is God', which Priestley was himself keen to avoid. However, the critical trend has been largely to accept Coleridge's reading as an accurate account of Priestley's metaphysics, rather than as an attack on its implications. As a consequence, critics often attribute much, if not all, of the metaphysics in Coleridge's early poetry to Priestley's influence. H. W. Piper summarizes Priestley's metaphysics thus: 'there was no such thing as matter. What did exist was active force. And the apparent solidity of the matter was only the resistance of this force. Thus the whole universe was spiritual force, and all action the direct action of God.'[7] Seamus Perry suggests that it was his reading of Priestley that prepared Coleridge for the Berkeleian immaterialism which he later, if briefly, adopted. Priestley and Berkeley are alike by dint of both being monists. This is made apparent by Priestley's discussion of Andrew Baxter's dualism:

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[6] Southey, Robert, *Joan of Arc* (Bristol: printed by Bulgin and Rosser, for Joseph Cottle, Bristol, and Cadell and Davies, and G. G. and J. Robinson, London, 1796; repr. Oxford: Woodstock, 1993), p. 42n.

[7] H. W. Piper, *The Active Universe* ([London]: The Athlone Press, University of London, 1962), p.27, hereafter Piper 1962.

> Turning to Baxter's attribution of physical properties to God's perpetual workings, Priestley reasonably asks why even this small amount of inert matter must be retained: its persistence makes the whole cosmos suffer from a gigantic version of the soul-body mystery […] Priestley's necessary conclusion is that 'there is not in nature any such thing as *matter* distinct from *the Deity* and *his operations*'.[8]

These summaries of Priestley's thinking appear to me to be misleading. When Priestley explains that the powers of resistance 'are the immediate agency of the Deity himself', and that 'there is no active force in nature, but that of God', he is explicating the immaterialism of Andrew Baxter and Giordano Bruno, rather than necessarily advocating them as part of his own theory (*Disquisitions* I p.14-15). It is true that Priestley's adoption of the physical points hypothesis is somewhat similar to the ideas of Baxter, but to characterize God's action on the universe as 'spiritual force', as Piper does, or to refer, like Perry, to 'Priestley's immaterialism', is to apply immaterialist terminology to Priestley, which is inappropriate (Perry p.121). Priestley believes the nature of existence to be physical, which makes it predictable and knowable through the senses. It derives its existence from God, but that makes it no less tangible. Reality is created by God, dependent on Him for its continued existence, but is constructed independently of the human mind. As Priestley explains in his introduction:

> the doctrine of *necessity*, […] is the immediate result of the doctrine of the materiality of man; for mechanism is the undoubted consequence of materialism […] proof enough is advanced that every human volition is subject to certain fixed laws, and that the pretended *self–determining power* is altogether imaginary and impossible. (*Disquisitions* I p.5)

Priestley thus clearly explains his metaphysics as one which stresses the passivity of humanity. His system is materialist, being the opposite of immaterialism which tends to focus on the agency of the soul in thinking and perceiving.

Piper quotes Priestley's observation that 'If they say that, on my hypothesis, there is no such thing as matter and that everything is spirit, I have no objection […] The world has been too long amused with mere names', as evidence he did not believe in matter, but to make this claim is to focus on one rhetorical point, deployed to discredit dualism, at the expense of the tenor of Priestley's argument as a whole.[9] Similarly, to argue that Priestley claimed that 'matter is really a product of spirits' and that he sought to 'spiritualize matter rather than to effect universal reduction to the conditions of materiality', as

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[8] Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.119-20, hereafter Perry. *Disquisitions* I pp.14, 26-27, 33, 85-6.

[9] Piper 1962 p.35, *Disquisitions* I p.33. Again, Priestley begins to sound like Berkeley by coming from the opposite direction.

Nigel Leask does, is misleading.[10] Leak seems to be following Coleridge's claim in *Biographia Literaria* that Priestley 'stript matter of all its material properties; substituted spiritual powers; and when we expected to find a body, behold! we had nothing but its ghost! the apparition of a defunct substance!' (*BL* I 136). However, this characterization is misleading. Priestley argues against the immaterialist system on the basis that if only immaterial substance existed, we could not conceive of space or place (*Disquisitions* I p.76). His whole second volume is a discussion of necessity as resulting inevitably from a materialist system, which makes Leask's attempt to differentiate Priestley's system from '"mechanical" materialism', a curious one (Leask p.24). Both of Priestley's contentions rely on the assumption that the nature of the world is material and hence knowable through observation.[11]

There have been attempts to explain the metaphysics of Coleridge's early poetry as too neatly attributable to Priestleian ideas. In lines written by Coleridge for *Joan of Arc*, God is addressed as 'All-conscious PRESENCE of the Universe! / Nature's vast ever-acting ENERGY! / In will, in deed, IMPULSE of All to all'.[12] Piper, Jonathan Wordsworth, and Mary Jacobus read these lines, alongside parts of 'Religious Musings', as Priestleian: conceiving all matter as divine energy.[13] Priestley does suggest that the 'constant agency' of God accounts for the coherence of solid atoms (*Disquisitions* I p.40). The idea of 'agency' reinforces the separation of God from the world: God acts on something which is not Himself. Priestley's monism is unity of substance, not of being. Later, Priestley describes God as 'a Being, properly speaking, *every where present*, constantly supporting, and, at pleasure controling the laws of nature, but not the object of any of our senses' (*Disquisitions* I p.148). However, while Coleridge's 'ever-acting ENERGY' coincides with Priestley's idea of God 'constantly supporting' the laws of nature, Jacobus goes further by suggesting that in '*Joan of Arc*, accordingly, the dead Newtonian universe […] is replaced by a Priestleian system of informing, omnipresent Mind.'[14] The 'omnipresent Mind' is something Priestley accepted in material terms, but, here, the phrase suggests the sort of immaterial God he rejects.

In the poem, Coleridge declares that:

> … Properties are God: the naked mass
> Acts only by its inactivity.
> Here we pause humbly. Others boldlier think
> That as one body is the aggregate
> Of atoms numberless, each organiz'd;

[10] Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1988), p.24.

[11] Priestley is interested in optical illusions, noting that objects seemingly touching are actually kept at a distance from one another, and that when reflection happens, the light does not make contact with the object's surface. See *Disquisitions* I pp.17-20.

[12] Southey, p.65, ll. 443-445.

[13] Piper 1962 pp.35-6, Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads 1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp.64-65, Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp.190-192, hereafter *MoH*.

[14] Jacobus, pp.64-65.

So by a strange and dim similitude
Infinite myriads of self-conscious minds
Form one all-conscious Spirit, who directs
With absolute ubiquity of thought
All his component monads…[15]

The view of the poem is seemingly that 'Properties are God': matter is inert and the divine spirit is responsible for its powers. Coleridge thus reverts to the dualism of Andrew Baxter. Furthermore, the earlier language of the poem, in which humanity is 'in this low world / Placed with our backs to bright reality,' needing to learn to distinguish 'The substance from its shadow' is Platonic (p.40 ll.20-24). 'Others boldlier think' contrasts this Platonized dualism with the system of monads. The poem disparages the system of monads, since 'boldlier' suggests 'rashly' or 'wrongly'. Piper, however, reads these lines as Coleridge explaining his own 'Priestleian' system. Piper suggests that the 'monads' refers to Priestley's points of force, which are 'forms of energy and which are *components* of the all-conscious Spirit […] a recognizable statement of Priestley's Unitarianism'.[16] However, by ascribing intelligence to the monads themselves, these lines propose a vital theory radically divergent from Priestley's assertion that sentience is the result of organization (*Disquisitions* I pp.150-152). Given that Priestley does not believe in the immaterial as traditionally conceived, it would be odd for Coleridge to use the word 'spirit' were he wishing to allude to Priestley's ideas. Furthermore, the lines in Coleridge's poem reduce God to the sum of all consciousness, which is exactly what Priestley rejects. Jacobus is therefore mistaken in equating this 'Ominpresent mind' with Priestleian metaphysics.

The idea of God as the energy of creation is overextended in some readings of 'Religious Musings'. Jonathan Wordsworth takes the lines, 'There is one Mind, one omnipresent Mind / Omnific. His most holy name is LOVE' (*PW* 101, ll.105-106), as Coleridge's reassertion of 'a Christian commonplace' which is developed into the One Life (*MoH* p.216). He then suggests that the idea of God as energy from Priestley becomes 'a pervasive life-force' in Coleridge's poetry (*MoH* p.190). According to Jane Stabler, 'For both' Coleridge and Barbauld, 'the world is "filled" with the "one life" of Priestleyan Unitarianism […] Coleridge conjectures the influence of "one intellectual Breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all"'.[17] However, on closer inspection, these lines from 'Effusion XXXV', which provide the closest thing to a definition of the 'one life' in this period, are not at all Priestleian:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,

[15] Southey, *Joan of Arc*, Pp.42-43, ll.40-7.
[16] Piper 1962 p.39-40.
[17] Jane Stabler ,'Space for Speculation: Coleridge, Barbauld, and the Poetics of Priestley' in Nicholas Roe, ed., *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp. 175-204, p.193.

> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze,
> At once the Soul of each, and God of All? (*PW* 115, ll.44-48)

The 'organic harps' are parts of the physical world, but the 'Breeze' of God, being 'intellectual', suggests something immaterial, as does the 'Soul of each'. The lines therefore offer a dualist metaphysics. Priestley's metaphysics, by contrast, is monist and materialist. He does not believe in the soul, considering it one of the 'heathenish notions', originating with the Ancient Egyptians, which has been mixed with Christianity, to the faith's confusion (*Disquisitions* I pp.68-70, 207-208). His theology stresses bodily resurrection, not spiritual existence, as the form the afterlife shall take (*Disquisitions* I 'Preface' pp.vii-viii and pp.102-103, 162-163). In seeking to equate Coleridge's 'one life' with Priestley's system, Stabler, Wordsworth and others erase this fundamental distinction, converting Priestley's insistent monism into Coleridge's persistent, though often latent, dualism.

The overemphasis on Priestley has the effect of understating the importance of Ralph Cudworth. Coleridge borrowed Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* from the Bristol Library in May 1795.[18] Although Piper notes the influence of Cudworth, acknowledging that Coleridge's ideas on the plastic were drawn from him, he nevertheless diminishes their importance. Piper suggests that Platonic doctrine 'must have played its part in shaping the Unitarian concept of a God who is beyond as well as being the natural world, and who impels all things' (Piper 1962 pp.43-4). Furthermore, Piper argues that trying to know 'The substance from the shadow' is 'Platonic but it can equally echo Priestley's belief that God may manifest himself as a natural appearance or "symbol"' (Piper 1962 p.45). However, that is a strain. As Douglas Hedley explains, 'Priestley […] associates *Empiricism* in philosophy with *Unitarianism* in religion. By contrast Platonism, that is, *Idealism* in philosophy, is linked with *Trinitarianism* in religion.'[19] Priestley and Cudworth thus represent opposed intellectual traditions. Priestley, though he stresses God as unknowable to the senses, does not posit the existence of a spiritual realm for humans to access (*Disquisitions* I pp.148-149). The Platonic notion of a higher 'reality' obscured by the mundane is irreconcilable with Priestley's focus on the materiality of the world.

Piper quotes at length from Cudworth, the most significant parts being that '*Aristotle* himself held the world's animation or a mundane soul', and that '…the plastick nature essentially depends upon Mind and Intellect, and could not possibly be without it; for which reason the Philosopher joins Mind and

[18] George Whalley, The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge, 1793-8', *The Library 4* (1949), pp.114-32, p.120.

[19] Douglas Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy, and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 56.

Nature both together.'[20] Ancient philosophy offers its own version of the 'one life', a transcendent immaterial substance which connects and gives life to the individual material components of the known world. According to Piper:

> There is nothing here completely incompatible with Unitarianism. Cudworth's 'plastic natures' are unlike Coleridge's Monads and Priestley's units of Divine energy in that they are created spirits, not parts of the Divinity or 'Monads of the Infinite Mind', but as natural forces and agents of the divine purpose they are easily assimilated to the Unitarian system […] Priestley had suggested that neo-platonic doctrines of the soul, and particularly Cudworth's doctrine of the world-soul, supported his own views. (Piper 1962 p.46)

However, the passage of Priestley which Piper cites is simply one where he uses Cudworth as an authority on the ancients' belief about the soul, not as someone agreeing with Priestley.[21] In the *Disquisitions*, Priestley describes Pythagoras's notion that God 'is the universal spirit, that penetrates and diffuses itself through all nature' (*Disquisitions* I p.219). This position seems, as Tim Fulford suggests, close to Coleridge's 'Soul of each, and God of all'. Thus, 'Coleridge may have been developing his ideas of spiritual identification from Priestley's account.' Furthermore, Cudworth writes that Pythagoras's opinion is that '*God was a mind passing through the whole nature of things, from whom our souls were, as it were, decerped or cut out*' (Cudworth pp.373-374), which seems even closer to Coleridge's formulation and is a passage which Coleridge might have come to through following up his reading of Priestley.[22] These should not be confused with Priestley's own ideas, though.

Priestley believed that the Ancients' ideas about the soul as originating from the supreme Mind were the source of dualism and 'that this *system of philosophy,* and the *true system of revelation*, have always been diametrically opposite' (*Disquisitions* I p.3). The trinity is a corruption of scripture for Priestley, associated with Platonic ideas that were adapted by Church Fathers (*Disquisitions* I, pp.325, 344). Priestley thus rejects such ideas because 'it was naturally impossible that mankind, in the infancy of the world, should attain to just notions on these subjects' (*Disquisitions* I 291). His discussion of Pythagoras must be seen within this critical frame. Therefore, Platonism was, for Coleridge, a competing, not a complementary, influence with Priestley's.

Cudworth theorizes that a 'plastick nature', which acts towards an end regularly, methodically and artificially, is necessary in order for life to exist, as otherwise it would happen by mechanism and chance (which is atheistic and

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[20] As [mis]quoted by Piper 1962, p. 46. The original reads '[…] for this cause that philosopher does elsewhere join νοὺς and Φύσις, *mind* and *nature* both together' (Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, 2nd edn (London: printed for J. Walthoe, D. Midwinter, J. and J. Bonwick, W. Innys, R. Ware [and 17 others in London], 1743), 2 vols, p.169 and 171, hereafter Cudworth).

[21] Piper cites *Disquisitions* I pp.235-6. However, Priestley actually references Cudworth on p.234, and the discussion of Plato's universal soul on p.235 cites Isaac de Beausobre, not Cudworth, as its source.

[22] Tim Fulford, *Coleridge's Figurative Languages* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1991), p.56.

considered absurd by Cudworth) or else would require God's constant intervention (Cudworth pp.147-8). As it is life, it must be incorporeal, while also being unitary, so that it can act over discrete material bodies. Cudworth reasons that while each animal must have a plastic nature to join and hold its soul and body together, so there must be a general plastic nature which causes all things to move to one harmony (Cudworth pp.165-7).

At first sight, Cudworth's plastic nature seems to be the 'Plastic and vast […] intellectual Breeze' which is 'the Soul of each, and God of all' in 'Effusion XXXV'. Cudworth provided Coleridge with a metaphysical system to support the poetic conceit. Yet Piper also casts doubt on the source, preferring one from Priestley instead.[23] This is somewhat puzzling, given that Piper elsewhere considers Cudworth's plastic nature as influencing the poem (Piper 1962 pp.45-6). Piper seems to suggest that it was merely another way for Coleridge to express Priestley's ideas. Similarly, Kelvin Everest suggests that there is 'nothing inherent in Cudworth's ideas on "plastic nature" inconsistent with Coleridge's Unitarian, materialist position learnt from Hartley and Priestley.'[24] Coleridge was able to see a dualism and yet a oneness in Cudworth, as perhaps he had previously done in Priestley. However, Cudworth's plastic nature is derived from a dualist system: it is conceived as a solution to the separation between mind and nature introduced by Descartes. The plastic nature is the hypothesized principle to unite atomized matter with incorporeal spirit, as a means of involving God without the need for constant divine interference. It is it far removed from Priestley's monism. Coleridge's attempted synthesis of the two competing systems is thus unstable and cannot simply be characterized as a reformulation of Priestley's Unitarianism.

While Priestley rejects the inheritance of Greek philosophy as encouraging dualism, Cudworth, although not always clear in his attitude to the authors he quotes, marshals Neoplatonic theism, combined with atomistic physics, in defence of Christianity. If Coleridge is adopting Pythagoras's conception in 'Religious Musings', then he is blending Priestleian Unitarianism with Cudworth's Neoplatonism. Coleridge's synthesizing tendencies were thus evident from the beginning of his poetic career and while Priestley was a crucial influence on Coleridge's intellectual development, he was not one so powerful as to exclude competing traditions, even in the 1790s.

[23] H. W. Piper, '"The Eolian Harp" Again', *Notes & Queries* 15 (1) (January 1968), pp. 23-25, p.24.

[24] Kelvin Everest, *Coleridge's Secret Ministry: The Context of the Converzation Poems, 1795-1798* (Brighton: Harvester, 1979), p.205.