The Bristol miscellanies: Coleridge's conversational ideal for *Lyrical Ballads*

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CRITICS HAVE LONG PUZZLED OVER COLERIDGE'S CLAIM in a letter to Joseph Cottle that the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* 'are to a certain degree *one work*, in *kind tho' not in degree*, as an Ode is one work'.[1] In his seminal essay on 'The Unity of *Lyrical Ballads*', John Beer concluded that for a short period Wordsworth and Coleridge 'had been able to regard their respective contributions to the 1798 volume as more like stanzas of a common ode to joy'.[2] When it came to publishing the collection, however, the two poets appear to have had differing expectations. Wordsworth later asserted that he had 'published those poems for money and money alone'.[3] His growing dissatisfaction with the collaborative endeavour is borne out by his decision to title the expanded second edition '*Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems.* In Two Volumes. By W. Wordsworth'. As well as asserting his authorship, Wordsworth moved Coleridge's signal contribution, retitled 'The Ancient Mariner, A Poet's Reverie', to the penultimate position in volume one. This is an ambiguous gesture. In Wordsworth's *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), the penultimate position in the entire collection became an honorific one for his own 'Elegiac Stanzas' to John Wordsworth. In *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), however, the status of Coleridge's poem was noticeably lowered by Wordsworth's inclusion of a note in which he opined that '[t]he Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects'.[4]

This raises the question of why Wordsworth and Coleridge decided to publish together in the first place. Beer's account of the fusion of the two poets' creative ideals is supported by Wordsworth's claim in the 'Preface' that 'our opinions on the subject of poetry do almost entirely coincide' (*LB* 1, p.vii). Yet Wordsworth also hints at a more practical motivation when he states that '[f]or the sake of variety and from a consciousness of my own weakness I was induced to request the assistance of a Friend' (*LB* 1, p.vi). Here, he echoes the wording of the letter to Cottle, in which Coleridge wrote that 'to the publishing of *his poems* in two volumes [Wordsworth] is decisively repugnant & oppugnant—He deems that they would want variety &c &c' (*CL* 1, pp.411-2). Although distinctly Coleridgean in style, this letter certainly had Wordsworth's approval, since Wordsworth added a remark in his own hand to Coleridge's careful list of instructions to Cottle about how to print the volume (*CL* 1, p.412). When seeking the reason for Wordsworth's subsequent change of heart

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1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), vol. 1, p. 412, hereafter *CL*, cited by volume and page no.

2 John Beer, 'The Unity of *Lyrical Ballads*', *1800: The New Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Nicola Trott and Seamus Perry (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 6-22, pp. 21-2.

3 William Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, rev. Mary Moorman, Chester L. Shaver, and Alan G. Hill, 2nd edn, 8 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967-1993), vol. 1, p. 267.

4 William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1800), vol. 1, p. 214; hereafter *LB*.

regarding the structure and authorship of *Lyrical Ballads*, it is important to understand this potentially paradoxical emphasis on the need for 'variety' within a volume which was nonetheless 'one work'. Was it Wordsworth's, was it Coleridge's, or was it a shared ideal? The answer to this question may be sought in the two poets' publishing activities prior to *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wordsworth and Coleridge came to the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* with widely differing experiences of such joint undertakings. During his time in Cambridge and Bristol, Coleridge exhibited the extravert imagination for which he later became renowned in his *Table Talk*. Having collaborated with his fellow Pantisocrats Robert Southey and Robert Lovell, and with his companions Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd, Coleridge had rarely ventured into print as a poet without the addition of other names. By contrast, Wordsworth's chief published output consisted of the two single-author volumes *Descriptive Sketches* and *An Evening Walk*. In 1796, Coleridge opened the 'Preface' to his *Poems on Various Subjects* by stating that the volume contained 'Poems on various subjects written at different times and prompted by very different feelings' and acknowledged that this constituted a 'heavy disadvantage'.[5] The following year, Coleridge made a virtue of this 'disadvantage' when he added the works of Lamb and Lloyd to the second edition, now simply titled *Poems*. The epigraph to the volume speaks of 'like Muses joined together':[6] through this strategy of co-publication, Coleridge was able to reframe the potentially desultory nature of the original collection as the convivial variety of a co-authored volume. Variety thus became one of Coleridge's ideals for collaboration, which he carried with him to *Lyrical Ballads*.

Coleridge's first major experience of collaborative authorship came in 1794 when he cooperated with Southey, and initially with Lovell, on *The Fall of Robespierre: An Historic Drama*. At the time, the three poets were residing in Bristol and trying to raise money for their plans to establish a Pantisocracy in America.[7] According to Southey, the initial plan was for Coleridge to write the first act, Southey the second, and Lovell the third. However, it was deemed that Lovell's act 'was not in keeping, and therefore [Southey] undertook to supply' his part.[8] Despite this multiple authorship, the finished work was published under the name of 'S. T. Coleridge', with Coleridge assuring Southey that '[i]t would appear ridiculous to put two names to *such* a Work' (*CL* 1, p.106). Though presented as a single-author work, the drama displays a marked difference between Coleridge's and Southey's contributions. In Coleridge's act, the drama is internalised, as Coleridge's characters speak in small groups or alone to interrogate conflicting definitions of patriotism. After Robespierre claims a 'steel-strong Rectitude of soul', Couthon remarks in an aside: 'So we

5 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: G. G. and J. Robinsons, 1796), p. v.

6 The translation is supplied by Alison Hickey, 'Double Bonds: Charles Lamb's Romantic Collaborations', *ELH*, 63:3 (October 1996), 735-71, p. 735.

7 Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Flamingo, 1999), p. 73.

8 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, 4 vols (London: William Pickering, 1836-9), vol. 1, p. 3.

deceive ourselves! What goodly virtues / Bloom on the poisonous branches of ambition!'.[9] By contrast, Southey's two acts are grand pieces of stagecraft, in which Robespierre and his opponents denounce one another bombastically to '*[v]iolent applauses from the galleries*', before a slew of messengers bring news of the developing political crisis in reports from off-stage.[10] Southey's Jacobinism leads Tallien to pronounce confidently that 'France shall be saved! her generous sons attached / To principles, not persons'.[11] This runs directly counter to Coleridge's contribution, which emphasises the extent to which 'principles' are constructed out of veiled personal interests. Southey's acts focus on public power play, while Coleridge's anticipates his later claim that Shakespeare wrote 'with the inward eye of meditation upon his own nature'.[12] If the play succeeds dramatically, it is because Coleridge has already problematized the concepts of honour and treachery which Southey's characters then compete to apply to themselves.

Southey's and Coleridge's differing definitions of the dramatic may also be felt in Southey's epic poem *Joan of Arc*. As acknowledged in the 'Preface' to the first edition, Coleridge originally contributed around four hundred lines to the 'beginning of the second book'.[13] Coleridge's contribution begins by arresting the narrative action with a lengthy monologue on the '[p]reternatural agency' which moved Joan to rescue France from English domination: 'No more of Usurpation's doom'd defeat, / Ere we the deep preluding strain have pour'd / To the Great Father, Only Rightful King'.[14] Inserting a 'prelude' into the middle of Southey's narrative, Coleridge detours via an annotated blank verse exposition of Newtonian optics to explore the nature of terrestrial reality, which he reads as:

> one mighty alphabet
> For infant minds; and we in this low world
> Placed with our backs to bright Reality,
> That we may learn with young unwounded ken
> Things from their shadows.[15]

This implies that the human actions which Southey narrated in the first book are only 'shadows' of the true, divinely-ordained action of the historical epic, which takes place beyond the human 'ken'. At the end of Coleridge's contribution, Southey refutes this Miltonic suggestion with the invocation: 'Return, adven'trous Song! to where Dunois / With eager ear heard from the Maid her tale'.[16] By employing the trope of returning a deviant epic to its true

[9] Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey, *The Fall of Robespierre. An Historic Drama* (Cambridge: Benjamin Flower, 1794), pp. 9-10.
[10] Ibid., p. 30.
[11] Ibid., pp. 31-2.
[12] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 646.
[13] Robert Southey, *Joan of Arc, an epic poem* (Bristol: Joseph Cottle, 1796), p. vi.
[14] Ibid., p. 39.
[15] Ibid., p. 40.
[16] Ibid., pp. 65-6.

path, Southey reasserts his own emphasis on the 'power of Story'.[17] In this way, the poets' contributions advance their competing definitions of the epic. Charles Lamb later drew a similar distinction between their voices, writing to Coleridge that: 'Southey certainly has no pretensions to vie with you in the Sublime of poetry, but he tells a plain tale better than you'.[18] Yet on the page these alternative visions appear to sit happily beside one another, as Southey's lines are silently interspersed between Coleridge's. Though Southey removed Coleridge's contribution in the second edition of *Joan of Arc*, these experiences of collaboration demonstrated that the presence of various visions in the same work did not necessarily render it unfit for publication. Even in a single narrative poem, it seemed, it was possible for two voices and visions to sit aside and complement one another without destroying the unity of the whole.

In 1795, Southey and Lovell joined forces to publish a jointly-authored collection simply entitled *Poems*, in which the two poets distinguished their contributions by the signatures 'Bion' (Southey) and 'Moschus' (Lovell). As one of the first readers of this volume, Coleridge was unimpressed, counselling Southey that 'Lovell has no *taste*—or *simplicity* of feeling […] For God's sake let us have no more Bions or Gracchuses' (*CL* 1, p.134). Despite this, the collection seems to have had an impact on Coleridge's expectations of collaborative publishing. In their 'Preface', Southey and Lovell justified their decision to collaborate on the basis of a quotation from Michael Scott's work *The Philosopher's Banquet*: 'the over-cloying humor of this age hath so overburdened the world with multiplicity of al kinds, that scarce there is one subject left upon the head whereof a hundred have not trampled over'.[19] Their solution to this anxiety about the possibility of writing anything original is to league together and celebrate this 'multiplicity' in a volume that speaks with a variety of voices. As Tim Fulford has recently pointed out, literary coteries became popular in the Romantic period because they 'overcame the pressure of solitary authorship', 'counteracted the isolation stemming from the repressive political climate', and 'gave legitimacy to the language […] worked out in conversation and manuscript'.[20] In the Bion and Moschus volume, Southey and Lovell avoided the 'pressure of solitary authorship' by addressing poems not to the reader or the public, but to each other.

Formally and stylistically, the volume is constituted by variety, combining the blank verse of Southey's 'The Retrospect' with heroic couplets, epistles, elegies, epitaphs, sonnets, odes (both regular and irregular), romances, ballads, and others from the catalogue of Romantic genres and forms. Southey and Lovell emphasise diversity over originality, perhaps taking their cue from *The*

[17] Ibid., p. vii.

[18] Charles Lamb, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, 3 vols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975-1978), vol. 1, pp. 194-5.

[19] Robert Southey and Robert Lovell, *Poems: containing The retrospect, odes, elegies, sonnets, &c* (Bath: R. Cruttwell, 1795), p. vii.

[20] Tim Fulford, *Romantic Poetry and Literary Coteries: The Dialect of the Tribe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 40.

Arno Miscellany (1784) and *The Florence Miscellany* (1785), which catapulted the Della Cruscan poets to notoriety by introducing them as a group. As noted by Andrew Piper, the 'discourse of friendship and the practice of gift-giving under which miscellanies were produced […] were intended to counteract […] the anonymity of mass circulation'.[21] Like the Della Cruscans, Southey and Lovell feign indifference to the market by addressing their poems to one another. Lovell echoes the 'retrospective lays' (p. 4) of Southey's opening poem with his own 'retrospective view' (p. 41), which is again taken up by the 'retrospective beam' of Southey's sonnet 'To Reflection' (p. 72). Closing itself defensively to the potentially hostile public, the volume looks back instead to the idyllic time of childhood and invites the reader to step into the closed circle of friendship. It thus secures its own reception against the attacks of critics and reviewers.

Coleridge recognised the effectiveness of this strategy as a solution to the problematic diversity he encountered when assembling his *Poems on Various Subjects*. The critics commented on the miscellaneous character of this publication, with the anonymous reviewer in the *Analytical Review* declaring that the poems 'are written on a variety of subjects, and with very different degrees of merit'.[22] One point upon which the critics seemed to agree, however, was that the most successful section of the volume was the 'Effusions', which also contained contributions from Coleridge's friends and family. Felicity James notes that Coleridge 'heavily revised' Lamb's contributions to the 1796 edition, and that this partially undermined the volume's 'movement between private affection and public, politicised benevolent action […] by unconsciously providing and alternative narrative of creative imprisonment, anxiety, and enclosure'.[23] Unaware of this dynamic, the unsigned critic for the *Critical Review* noted that Lamb's sonnets 'are very beautiful', also singling out the contributions of Samuel Favell, Robert Southey, and Sara Coleridge for praise.[24] Perhaps incited by such remarks, Coleridge expanded the second edition of *Poems* to include a 'complete Collection' of Lamb's poems, alongside those of Charles Lloyd.[25] Though Coleridge chose to group each author's contributions separately, the newly collaborative nature of the volume nonetheless reframes familiar poems in interesting ways. For example, the 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton' is no longer the work of a single poet fearing a similar fate, but becomes a collaborative tribute whose plural pronouns invite Chatterton posthumously into coterie of poets: 'And we, at sober eve, would round thee throng, / Hanging, enraptur'd, on thy stately song! / And greet with smiles the young-eyed Poesy / All deftly mask'd, as hoar Antiquity' (p. 26).

[21] Andrew Piper, 'The Art of Sharing: Reading in the Romantic Miscellany', *Bookish Histories: Books, Literature, and Commercial Modernity, 1700-1900*, ed. Ina Ferris and Paul Keen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 131.

[22] J. R. Jackson (ed.), *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1995), vol. 1, p. 33.

[23] Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 56.

[24] Jackson (ed.), *Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 34.

[25] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Charles Lloyd, *Poems, by S. T. Coleridge. To which are added poems by Charles Lamb, and Charles Lloyd* (Bristol: J. Cottle, 1797), 2nd edn, p. xix.

More so than Southey and Lovell, the trio of poets bound their volume together with internal forms of address. In addition to Coleridge's repeated apostrophes to 'dear Charles' (p. 66), many of the poems are written 'To a Friend' or a named individual, and several of them ('To C. Lloyd on his Proposing to Domesticate with the Author', 'Lines Addressed to S. T. Coleridge', and 'To Charles Lloyd, An unexpected Visitor') employ paratextual modes of address which position the volume's readers and critics as eavesdroppers on a series of private conversations between the authors. This legitimises the miscellaneous character of the volume, making a virtue of the young poets' tendency to experiment with a variety of different forms, and also lends confidence to their voices, since they are assured of an initially favourable reception among their peers. This newfound confidence is reflected in the structure of the volume. For example, the 'Effusions', which Coleridge previously refused to call 'sonnets' on the grounds that they 'do not possess that *oneness* of thought which I deem indispensable',[26] are now presented as 'Sonnets, Attempted in the Manner of the Rev. W. L. Bowles' with a half-title page and their own introduction.[27] The fact that Lamb's and Lloyd's sections also contain sonnets written in a similarly reflective manner helps to justify Coleridge's interpretation of the form.

Within the volume, Coleridge, Lamb, and Lloyd are enabled to become arbiters of taste and to begin fashioning their own coterie, including Bowles, Southey, Cottle, and even Wordsworth, whom Coleridge introduces in a footnote to the 'Ode to Sara' as 'a Poet whose versification is occasionally harsh, and his diction too frequently obscure: but whom I deem unrivalled among the writers of the present day'.[28] Through the intertwining of their voices, the three poets derive strength to articulate their own ideal of a poetry which roots its political commitments in the spirit of domesticity and friendship. The poet's real-life attachments off the page form a special supplement of knowledge from which the reader is excluded, as in Lloyd's Lines Addressed to S. T. Coleridge': 'My Coleridge! oft I muse upon the cot / To which our footsteps bend; I envy not / The enrobed son of wealth […] when I can dwell / On the pure pleasures of our simple cell!' (p. 179). Rather than depending on the reader's opinion, the poets become hosts of the volume, inviting the reader in to their domestic circle.

Notoriously, this circle was put to the test when Coleridge published three 'Sonnets Attempted in the Manner of Contemporary Writers' under the name of Nehemiah Higginbottom in the *Monthly Magazine* for November 1797. Privately, Coleridge admitted to Cottle that he wrote them 'in ridicule of my own, & Charles Lloyd's, & Lamb's', though Southey angrily assumed that the second sonnet, to 'Simplicity', was directed at him (*CL* 1, p.357). Coleridge later maintained that he composed the sonnets 'to expose *risu honesto* the three sins of poetry, one or the other of which is the most likely to beset a

[26] Coleridge, *Poems* (1796), p. x.
[27] Coleridge, Lamb, and Lloyd, *Poems* (1797), p. 69.
[28] Ibid., p. 88.

young writer'.[29] However, the heavily-stylised Higginbottom sonnets also reveal Coleridge's awareness that the companionable voices in the second edition of *Poems* sometimes work against one another rather than pulling together.

Despite the Higginbottom episode, the second edition of *Poems* stood as an example of how a poetic volume could be strengthened by variety. In 'To C. Lloyd', Coleridge asserts that 'We'll laugh at wealth, and learn to laugh at fame, / Our hopes, our knowledge, and our joys the same, / As neighb'ring fountains image, each the whole' (p. 115). The collection thus derives its wholeness not from uniformity of style or the absence of variety, but by virtue of the poets' supposedly corresponding visions. Perhaps under Coleridge's influence, Wordsworth expressed a similar idea in the 1800 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* when he claimed that 'our opinions on the subject of poetry do almost entirely coincide' (*LB* 1, p.vii). By then, however, the differences between their visions were becoming manifest, as Coleridge urged Wordsworth to go on with *The Recluse* and announced himself to be 'wholly against the publication of any small poems' (*CL* 1, p.527). The previous year, Coleridge no doubt had the experience of his earlier collaborations in mind when he assured Cottle that Wordsworth's poems would 'want variety' and that the pieces in *Lyrical Ballads* 'are to a certain degree *one work*, in *kind tho' not in degree*' (*CL* 1, p.412). Indeed, Coleridge had advanced a similar argument that individual poems 'are as stanzas, good relatively rather than absolutely' in the advertisement to the 'Supplement' of poems at the end of the 1797 volume (*CL* 1, p.412). Here, for the first time, works by Coleridge, Lamb, and Lloyd are intermixed, on the grounds that 'the Authors regard them, as of inferior merit; and they are therefore rightly placed, where they will receive some beauty from their vicinity to others much worse' (p. 245).

Though seemingly paradoxical, this idea that poems and poets cooperate in order to augment each other's 'merit' legitimises the publication of fragmentary and imperfect pieces on the assumption, expressed in Coleridge's 'To a Friend, together with an Unfinished Poem', that neighbouring pieces will supply 'the aiding verse' (p. 65). The same logic, one might argue, would have justified the inclusion of the first two parts of 'Christabel' in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. However, Coleridge began to appreciate that 'Tintern Abbey' had been composed in Wordsworth's 'own character',[30] without the need for 'aiding verse', and that there was therefore no room in the second edition—either physically or conceptually—for a vision as distinctive as 'Christabel'.[31] Coleridge's experiences of multiple authorship and collaborative publication in Cambridge and Bristol had helped to extend his concept of the 'one life' into the sphere of intellectual property. In the 1797 volume, the 'Contemplant Spirits' (p. 148) of 'Religious Musings' become, on one level, versions of Coleridge, Lloyd, and Lamb, who declares himself to be a fellow 'contemplant,

[29] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. Walter Jackson Bate and James Engell, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 1, p. 29.

[30] Coleridge, *The Major Works*, p. 314.

[31] Graham Davidson, *Coleridge's Career* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), p. 117.

solitary man' in his poem 'The Sabbath Bells'. To this extent, the organisation of the 1797 volume performs Coleridge's pronouncement that 'to know ourselves / Parts and proportions of one wond'rous whole! / This fraternizes man, this constitutes / Our charities and bearings' (p. 128). In 1798, Wordsworth was happy to replicate this vision of oneness from variety, of poems alike 'in *kind tho' not in degree*' (*CL* 1, p.412), but by 1800 he had become less convinced by such arguments, and potentially less in need of them.

In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge reflected on why his conversational ideal for *Lyrical Ballads* had not been fully realised. Self-deprecatingly, he suggested that Wordsworth's 'industry had proved so much more successful […] that my compositions, instead of forming a balance, appeared rather an interpolation of heterogeneous matter'.[32] Since Wordsworth's poems were no longer in need of 'aiding verse', Coleridge suggests that his own contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* became redundant. Furthermore, he could no longer speak of unity 'in *kind tho' not in degree*', since the differing degrees of their productivity had become so manifest (*CL* 1, p.412). While Southey, Lloyd, and Lamb had responded favourably to Coleridge's vision of unity in variety, Coleridge realised that Wordsworth's voice wanted no supplement. Their attempt at collaborative composition in 'The Wanderings of Cain' had failed to reach fruition because it was 'impracticable, for a mind so eminently original to compose another man's thoughts and fancies'.[33] In 1802, Coleridge announced that 'we begin to suspect, that there is, somewhere or other, a *radical* Difference [in our] opinions' (*CL* 2, p.812). However, Wordsworth did not abandon Coleridge's conversational ideal altogether. Arguably, this principle of organisation transmuted into one of the influences behind his announcement, in the 'Preface' to *The Excursion*, that his poems could be likened to 'the body of a gothic Church'.[34] In claiming that his 'minor Pieces' might be 'likened to the little Cells, Oratories, and sepulchral Recesses, ordinarily included in those Edifices', Wordsworth adapted Coleridge's vision of unity in variety to explain the consistency of his own work.[35] In effect, Wordsworth personalised Coleridge's vision of 'aiding verse' by becoming his own self-supplement. Rather than needing the support of other voices, Wordsworth's 'minor Pieces' claimed to derive their functional unity from their relation to *The Recluse*, the great unwritten epic alongside which Wordsworth's other poems were to be read 'as stanzas, good relatively rather than absolutely' (*CL* 1, p.412).

[32] Coleridge, *The Major Works*, p. 315.
[33] Ibid., p. 41.
[34] William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James Butler, Michael C. Jaye, and David García (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 38.
[35] Ibid.