

# Coleridge's Need to Draw

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IN MY EARLY RESEARCH INTO THE POETRY of Samuel Taylor Coleridge I was captured by the unbridled and ebullient descriptions of his walking tours and excursions, in both his letters and notebooks.<sup>1</sup> I was also intrigued by the drawings sporadically embedded in these descriptions, as they often appeared, surprisingly, as both tentative and incongruous. I noted too that on one occasion, following one of his efforts, Coleridge had ventured—‘I wish very much I could draw’. Some years on, still intrigued by this, I returned to the subject—an aspect of Coleridge’s work that I discovered had received relatively limited attention in secondary literature.<sup>2</sup> Prompted by Coleridge’s expressed need, and as an introductory study into the significance of his efforts, this article considers a small selection of his drawings and their context, seeking some insight into several basic questions: When and why did Coleridge first take up drawing? What were his circumstances at the time? How seriously did he pursue the development of his drawing skills? Who, and what, were his subjects and influences? What affect did the introduction of these drawings have on his poesis? While Coleridge’s notebooks contain significantly more drawings than do his letters, and it was in his notebooks that he first introduced drawing into his writing, it was in his letters that his drawings were first ‘published’.

My focus in this article is chiefly on the drawings in the early letters and are primarily from the published transcriptions of Earl Leslie Griggs (*CL* I–II)—drawings that could verily have been overlooked because of their smallness and the poor condition of many of the MSS.<sup>3</sup> As these publications account for all that most people would know of Coleridge’s drawings, some corresponding MSS drawings have been included, enabling consideration around Coleridge’s work and the applied limitations of the printing technology.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Texts which variously attend to Coleridge’s notebook drawings include: Harold D. Baker, ‘Landscape as Textual Practice in Coleridge’s Notebooks’, *ELH* 59.3 (1992): 651–70; E. S. Shaffer, ‘Coleridge’s Ekphrasis: Visionary Word-Painting’, in *Coleridge’s Visionary Languages*, ed. by Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 111–21 (hereafter CE); Josie Dixon, ‘The Notebooks’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Ann C. Colley, ‘Coleridge Walks: Boots and the Measure of the Landscape’, *Romanticism* 27:1 (2021): 28–45.

<sup>3</sup> Griggs organised the publication of the letters accordingly: Early Years 1785–1806, 638 letters (*CL* I–II); Middle Years 1807–1819, 580 letters *CL* III–IV); Later Years 1820–1834, 609 letters (*CL* V–VI).

<sup>4</sup> Consider Paul Cheshire’s scholarship on the topic, ‘Coleridge’s Notebooks: An Obliterary Study’, *The Coleridge Bulletin* 39 (n.s.) 2012): 1–28.

Out of all of Coleridge's surviving letters from this period only seventeen of them contain one or more drawings. This comparatively low number suggests that the number of missing letters containing sketches would have been relatively small. Almost half of the seventeen letters were written during Coleridge's time in Germany (1798–99), and all bar two of these were to his wife Sarah. The two exceptions were to Thomas Poole. The final three letters were written in 1804, early into his trip to Malta. In these seventeen letters he (ostensibly) reaches out to a small circle of people either dear to him or close associates: Thomas Poole, his wife, Samuel Purkis, Humphry Davy, Sara Hutchinson, William Sotheby, Thomas Wedgwood, Robert Southey, Daniel Stuart. While small in number, these letters with their drawings plot rich and fruitful markers across definitive periods in Coleridge's early work and life—operating much like the string of radiating circles created in the journey of a skipping stone as it disturbs the surface of a lake.

### *Germany*

The earliest of Coleridge's surviving letters is to his mother from Christ's Hospital on 4 February 1785 when he was 13. However, it was not until 26 October 1798 that the first drawings appeared, in a long letter to Thomas Poole ['My best and dearest Friend'] (CL I 430–35).

for the foot-passengers—the Gable Ends of the Houses, all towards  
the street; some in the ordinary Triangular form, —but most  
of them  notched and *shapified* with more than Chinese

Figure 15

Here Coleridge includes 2 thumbnail drawings that relate to the streets of Hamburg, the German city in which he first and very briefly resided — 'Gable Ends of the Houses'— a most basic subject and one not too daunting a task for a tyro. This choice of subject is in keeping with Coleridge's stated aims in traveling to Germany, his first trip away from his native country. In a letter to Poole, 5 weeks before his departure, Coleridge outlined his scheme: 'I propose . . . to stay 3 or 4 months, in which time I shall at least have learnt the language [. . .] and the wisdom that 3 or 4 months sojourn among a new people must give to a watchful & thinking man' (CL I 414–15).

The second letter to include a drawing is addressed to his wife Sarah ['My dearest Love'] and dated 8 November 1798 (CL I 435–40). The tiny drawing, a baffling tangle of lines, is intended to depict a type of doorbell that Coleridge found ubiquitous to Hamburg and Ratzeburg. It is metonymical, insofar as this

<sup>5</sup> CL I 431 (26 October 1798). I have dimmed the text surrounding all the letter drawings so as to focus attention on the drawings.

technology conveys the noise that Coleridge encountered day and night in Hamburg and Ratzeburg: the 'incessant kling-kling-klang' of the doors being opened and closed; the chanting and bell-ringing at night by the Watchmen in Hamburg; the half-hourly horn blowing by those in Ratzeburg. Again, the subject is in keeping with the stated aims of his travels.

er else I have been,—A little Iron Rod, the length of my  
 ; fastened to the Top of the Door, thus  —The Bel  
 n one side of the Door—& bends in the shape of a Canopy

Figure 2<sup>6</sup>

This intriguing drawing marks Coleridge's ongoing attentiveness to sound and sounds. On his arrival in Germany, for example, when travelling by boat from Altona to Hamburg, Coleridge notes the paradoxical 'fine contrast between the uproar of solitary Desolation in the ocean, & the silence of the populous-banked Elbe'. However, much of his attention henceforth is on the German language. This is most evident in his notebook entries, which give considerable focus to his efforts and commitment to learning the language, including his list-making of categories of words, 'Sounds and Motion' being one such listing (CN I 354).<sup>7</sup> This focus is not an insignificant matter considering that oration, the spoken word, was so crucial to Coleridge's sense of self, a subject examined in depth by Tim Fulford.<sup>8</sup>

In this same letter, Coleridge contemplates drawing another technology, one of the great high stoves made with Dutch ebony tiles and found 'in every Room' of his hotel. He follows his delight in them with the musing:

I wish very much I could draw—how many awkward round about Sentences which after all convey no true idea, would three lines with a pencil save me: and I too am especially a very awkward Describer of Shapes & Dresses (CL I 440).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> CL I 438 (8 November 1798).

<sup>7</sup> Coleridge later wrote of his practical, conversational approach to learning to speak German: 'It was a regular part of my morning studies for the first six weeks of my residence in Ratzeburg, to accompany the good and kind old pastor, with whom I lived, from the cellar to the roof, through gardens, farm yard, &c. and to call every, the minutest, thing by its German name. Advertisements, farces, jests books, and the conversation of children' (BL I 206). Regardless of his accent or dress Coleridge's eloquence was not stymied: 'When in company, his vehemence of manner and wonderful flow of words and ideas, drew all eyes towards him, and gave him pre-eminence' (Clement Carlyon, *Early Years and Late Reflections* [London, 1836], I 29).

<sup>8</sup> Tim Fulford, 'Spiritual Politics: The Sense of Self in Speech and Writing', in *Coleridge's Figurative Language*, (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1991), 1–3 (hereafter CFL).

<sup>9</sup> Compare with sentiments expressed in Coleridge's letter to Sotheby on 13 July 1802: 'I was much pleased with your description of Wordsworth's character as it appeared to y[ou—] it is in few words, in half a dozen Strokes, like s[some of] Mortimer's Figures, a fine Portrait—' (CL 2 811). Simon Jarvis observed that '[because] painting is widely understood in this period to be a more fully mimetic medium than literature, painterly idioms offer a natural way of talking about what writing cannot exhaustively state and what the reader must bring' (quoted in Jessica Fay, 'Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Sir George Beaumont: Collaboration and the "Sketcheresque"', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 40 [n.s.] [2017]: 42).

It is a wish that dabbles with William Gilpin's theories on picturesque sketching: that in encountering new objects and new combinations, and seeing multiples of the same kind of objects but with various shapes, an enhanced knowledge is produced that makes it possible to represent 'by a few strokes in a sketch, those whole ideas, which make the most impression upon us'.<sup>10</sup> In this instance, however, Coleridge's fascination with the technology of the doorbell prevailed. Despite his expressed wish to be able to draw, he makes no mention of any striving or plan through which he might achieve this. It does appear that what Coleridge really required on such occasions was the convenience of an iPhone, or at least a camera obscura.

Coleridge's wish to draw raises a 'quandary' that emerged early in this study, not of awkward roundabout sentences but of awkward roundabout words. Were his pictures *sketches* or *drawings*?<sup>11</sup> How to refer to them? Was this an issue? I had instinctively taken them to be sketches, being produced amidst the flow of letter writing and appearing hasty and unpolished in their execution. The fact that Coleridge frequently wrote of having to conclude a letter speedily so as to catch the post supported this view. Referring to the OED etymologies of *draw* and *sketch* proved insightful, including underscoring the contiguity and chasm between words and pictures. It soon became evident that for Coleridge (at this stage) the terms *sketch*, *drawing*, and even *painting* were interchangeable. For simplicity's sake, in this article they are referred to as drawings.

The third letter dated 26 November 1798, again addressed to his wife, displays a marked conceptual development in Coleridge's approach to drawing. It carries three drawings, all based on observations made from a stage en route to Ratzeburg, Coleridge's next place of residence. The first is of particular interest. It captures a scene of boys playing in a farm-yard, swinging and running around a high post.

d some Boys playing in a farm-yard—One sat on a l  
d swung round and round  a black Skin—the ot  
g and running with forward hands, round and round

Figure 3<sup>12</sup>

The drawing is comprised of two sets of minimal, angled strokes, which impart a strong dynamic effective in relaying the animated scene. When examined against the notebook sketch of the same event, made three months earlier, a considerable shift in treatment is apparent. The notebook entry presents a

<sup>10</sup> William Gilpin, *Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Landscape Painting*, second ed. (London: R. Blamire, 1794; republished by Gregg International Publishers (England, 1972), 50–51; hereafter TE.

<sup>11</sup> Richard C. Sha, *The Visual and Verbal Sketch in British Romanticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), provides a comprehensive examination of the *sketch*.

<sup>12</sup> CL I 447 (26 November 1798).

loose drawing style and a more realistic representation of the scene's components (ground, pole, trees), with the pronounced horizontal and vertical lines negating any dynamic.

holiday-dressed people—/boys playing/One on a high



Tree swinging round & round a black  
others shouting & running round & round/but the p

Figure 4<sup>13</sup>

Considering his previous remarks, of his wish to be able to 'convey an idea in just a few lines', the letter drawing, despite its small size, is intriguing for the experimentation it evidences.

Coleridge then proceeds with another disparaging aside about his drawing skills:

What a Genius for painting I possess! I cannot help admiring the exquisite Elegance of my own drawing—it wants nothing but colours to make it surpass the original. (CL I 448)

While typically self-deprecating, in a sentence brimming with topical and contentious terms of the day, Coleridge parodies and intimates the artistic theories of Sir Joshua Reynolds and Gilpin.<sup>14</sup> Reynolds in his *Discourses* variously rails against the English notion of *genius* as an excellence that came naturally, proposing that 'Excellence is never granted to man, but as the reward of labour' (TD II 29). So too, Reynolds saw the distinction between drawing and painting as being that painting requires *colour* (TD II 30). Gilpin, conversely, recommended that sketching be undertaken with a black lead, and proposed that colour offered no substitute for simple *clair-obscur* (TE 77). Coleridge highlights the inherent and unsatisfactory lack of colour in his drawing. It is not surprising that he refers specifically to colour, for in his writings he is especially attendant to the resplendent play of colour in nature, in all its manifestations, as is soon exemplified in his extraordinary 'word painting' of scenes over the Ratzeburg lake:

About a month ago the vehemence of the wind had shattered the Ice—part of it, quite smattered, was driven to shore & had frozen anew; this was of a deep blue & represented an agitated sea—the water,

<sup>13</sup> CNI 341 (September 1798).

<sup>14</sup> *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, illustrated by explanatory notes and plates by John Burnet (London: J. Carpenter, 1842); hereafter TD.

that ran up between the great islands of Ice, shone of a yellow green (it was at sunset) and all the scattered islands of smooth ice were blood; intensely bright Blood: on some of the largest Islands the Fishermen were pulling out their immense nets thro' the Holes made in the Ice for this purpose, & the Fishermen, the net-poles, & the huge nets made a part of the Glory! O my God! How I wished you to be with me! (CL I 462)

Coleridge's sarcastic reflection on his own attempt at drawing—'*make it surpass the original*'—appears as a soft 'ribbing', reflecting on contemporary notions of the picturesque as espoused by Gilpin who believed that nature required assistance from the artist,<sup>15</sup> as, paradoxically, did Reynolds.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Journals*

In a letter to his wife (CL I 415), written while on board the packet on his way to Germany, Coleridge made clear his intention to produce a journal through his letters, noting that she and Poole would alternately receive his journal, and that this would detail everyday occurrences, starting with his departure from London. A closer look at the letters containing drawings reveals that the drawings are situated within those parts of the letters identified as journals, certainly in the early letters, supporting the view that Coleridge's foray into drawing came about chiefly as an aid for recollection towards the publication of a journal of his tour.<sup>17</sup>

The fifth letter to include a drawing is another addressed to his wife ['My dearest Love—'] and dated 14<sup>th</sup> January 1799 (CL I 458–64). It holds three rough drawings of varying sizes, all relating to the island town of Ratzeburg, which Coleridge relocated to on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1798. The first establishes the city in relation to the lake system on which it sits; the second represents 'our House / On the Hill' through a very tiny pictograph; the third [not included here], another annotated mapping, illustrates how the island is accessed via two bridges. The smallness of the drawings together with the inconstancy of the pen lines makes reading any detail difficult, calling attention to the inherent difficulties involved in using the same tools for drawing—quill and ink—as used for letter writing (compare, for example, figures 5 & 6).

<sup>15</sup> 'We must ever recollect that nature is most defective in composition; and *must* be assisted' (TE 67).

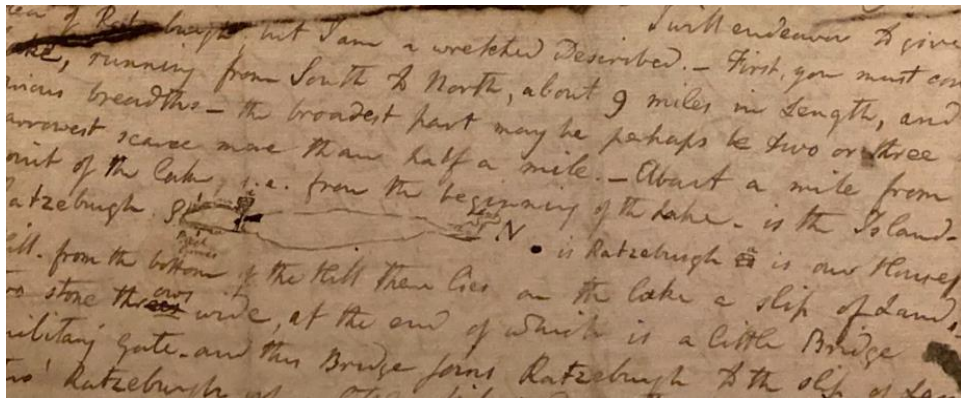
<sup>16</sup> '[The artist] acquires a just idea of beautiful forms; he corrects nature by herself, her imperfect state by her more imperfect' (TD III 41).

<sup>17</sup> Coleridge's resolve to publish fluctuated. In a letter to Southey on 19 December 1799 (CL I 457–550) after his return to England he expressed his doubts, yet in his letter to Josiah Wedgwood on 1 November 1800 he wrote of publication being imminent: (CL I 642–46). Some years later Coleridge revised and published parts of several of these letters in *Satyrane's Letters*, *The Friend*, *Biographia Literaria*. Later still, in the *Amulet* (see headnotes to CL I 420, 430, 435, 445, 453, 496). Drawings were not included in these revisions. A journal of his German tour was never published.

southernmost point of the lake, i.e. from the beginning of the Lake  
—is the Island-town of Ratzeburgh.



● is Ratzeburgh  is our House / on the Hill—from the bottom  
of the Hill there lies on the lake a slip of Land, scarcely two stone  
throws wide at the end of which is a little Bridge with a superb



Figures 5 & 6 (from top)<sup>18</sup>

In comparing the published drawing against that of the original MS, pivotal limitations of the printing process become immediately apparent, beginning with the regulated line work requiring the drawing to be offset from the text. Concomitant with the expansion of white space the drawing assumes a central position, as opposed to the MS where the drawing is embedded in the text. Here the inherent restraints of the printing process, in enforcing an expansion of space, produce a paradoxical contrast to the limited space experienced by letter writers of Coleridge's time, consequent to the high cost of materials and postage.<sup>19</sup>

Further into this letter Coleridge recalls another subject worthy of illustrating:

In the evening I wished myself a painter, just to draw a German Party at Cards—one man's long Pipe rested on the Table, smoking half [a] yard from his mouth by the fish-dish; another who w[as] shuffling, and of course had both hands employed, held his pipe in his Teeth, and it hung down between his Thighs even to his ancles (CL I 461).

<sup>18</sup> CL I 460. NYPL Berg Collection. 14 January 1799. Oversize (+++) Coleridge, Sara, his wife. ALS to. Slightly mutilated. Description of lake included in Satyrane's Letter no. 3. Biog. Lit. London, 1817, v. 2, pp. 234–35 1799 Jan. 14 (1 item) (1 item)<sup>19</sup> With his: Holograph journal for Sept. 16 & 17, 1798. B; Samuel Taylor Coleridge collection of papers, 1791–1894, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations; hereafter NYPL Berg Collection.

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, much could be ventured on this comparison and on the subject of transcription in general.

Here Coleridge displays his eye for the comic, even for caricature; however, his wish to draw remains a wish. He soon turns to a new subject, to the recollection of scenes experienced some months earlier [not recorded in his notebook], the phenomenal atmospheric changes observed at Ratzeburg's iced lake—

Of a morning I have seen the little [lake] covered with mist; and at last stood as the waters of the red Sea are said to have done when the Israelites passed—& between these two walls of the mist the Sunlight *burnt* upon the Ice in a straight *road* of Golden fire, all across the lake—intolerably bright, & the walls of Mist partaking of the light in a multitude of colours' (CL I 461).

It is a recollection of emotion held fast in memory, of immersion in the sublime beauty of nature speaking the glory of God. 'The Crossing of the Red Sea' was a biblical narrative from the Old Testament book of Exodus, and the story of Moses and the Israelites, at various stages of fleeing, had been interpreted by a long list of Renaissance artists, such as Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), Orazio Farinati, Nicholas Poussin and Charles Lebrun.<sup>20</sup> Coleridge could well have come across such works through reproductions.<sup>21</sup> Such powerful descriptions portraying extraordinary natural beauty and wonder—so vivid in their colouring—make light of Coleridge's earlier pleadings of being an awkward describer.<sup>22</sup>

I now move to the sixth letter containing a drawing, that to his wife dated 10 March 1799 (CL I 470–76).<sup>23</sup> It is another letter of love and desperate longing: 'I have thought & thought of you, and pictured you and the little ones so often & so often. . .' His imagination, he writes, is 'tired, down, flat and powerless, with feelings almost unqualified by thought [. . .] as if only simple BEING remained, blind and stagnant!' However, life in a new country invariably presents a range of curiosities, differences and new experiences, and Coleridge describes for her one such occasion. It is of an event propelled by a distant sound:

While we were drinking Tea, we heard a loud, very very loud Smacking of Whips—ran to the Window & lo! 30 Sledges full gallop, one after the other, each with one or two ladies [. . .] —All, Ladies, Students,

<sup>20</sup> The Submersion of the Pharaoh's Army in the Red Sea by Titian (1514–15); The Crossing of the Red Sea by Farinati (1583); The Crossing of the Red Sea by Poussin (1634); The Israelites crossing the Red Sea by Lebrun (1626–28).

<sup>21</sup> Titian, Poussin and Le Brun are highly praised by Reynolds in *Discourses*. Paley notes how, in his early 1790's poem 'To A Painter', Coleridge "invokes 'Titian's colours' and 'Rafael's magic' in an entirely conventional way" (Morton D Paley, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 1; hereafter STCEA).

<sup>22</sup> The subject of the relationship between the experience of nature and the impulse to speak of it is addressed by Gregory Leadbetter in 'Poets in a Transnatural Landscape' *Romanticism* 27 (2021): 46–62.

<sup>23</sup> Griggs omitted two small and very basic line drawings, outlines of the landscape surrounding the town of Ratzeberg. One is almost identical to a Notebook pencil sketch made three months earlier, in October 1798 (CNI 360).

Perhaps fearing failure through description, he wends his fragmented account around a curiously annotated drawing. 'I must draw the Sledge'. Resembling a distressed centipede on slippery ice, the drawing is effective in capturing the amusement, animation, and irregularity of the sight as it is humorously and enthusiastically described by Coleridge in words. So too it operates as a (distressed) schematic of the event: a visual sequential listing of the active components [a—the student standing astride behind the sledge; b—the ladies in the sledge; c c c—the reins; d d—the first horse; c c c c c—the reins (again); d d d—the second horse; e e—the postillion].<sup>24</sup> Here again, months after the event, the drawing captures in retrospect the joy of a moment held fast in memory.

[illegible]

This is one of the largest of the drawings and arguably one of the most engaging in relation to the text. On viewing a facsimile of the original MS

<sup>25</sup> *CL I 474*. NYPL Berg Collection. 10 March 1799. Oversize (+++) Coleridge, Sara, his wife. ALS to. Slightly mutilated 1799 Mar. 12 (1 item) (1 item) With his: Holograph journal for Sept. 16 & 17, 1798. B.



This walk with Sara would have been extremely gratifying for Coleridge, as it connected with a 'glorious Walk' he had described to her in a recent letter (*CL* II 852–55), a walk to Lodore in the most inclement weather, described by him with an imagination on fire. The drawing consists of a single line marking out 'the wild outline of the black masses of mountain, over Lodore & so on to the Gorge of Borrodale', a scene perceived 'thro' the bare Twigs of a grove of Birch Trees'. And over this outline an asterisk hovers, locating the object that Coleridge saw as he moved out from the grove: 'a red planet (so very red that I never saw a star so red, being clear and bright at the same time)'. Not only is the red planet 'bright and clear', it is also animated— 'it started, as it were, from the Heaven, like an eye-ball of Fire.'<sup>30</sup> The flared asterisk serves not only to locate the red planet but to manifest its dynamism. Yet while this striking occurrence is reflective of Coleridge's strong feelings for Sara Hutchinson, the asterisk, as a symbol of a matter unresolved, confers uncertainty. The drawing itself ably puts into effect Coleridge's notion that an idea may be conveyed with just a few lines. It also aligns with Gilpin's theory of an ideal picturesque landscape being composed of 'beautiful parts', in this case, a scene framed by 'the bare Twigs of a grove of Birch Trees', combined with an object, 'the red planet', seen after moving out of the grove. The drawing dovetails remarkably well with the next letter carrying a drawing, more than a year later.

This next letter (*CL* II 1080–83), another to Sara Hutchison [My Dear Sara!] and dated 12 March 1804, was written in the flyleaves of a folio volume containing a work by Sir Thomas Browne, the volume gifted to Hutchison by Coleridge. The letter includes a copy of the figure of the Quincunx from a 'Plate of Urns', which Coleridge points out as having been incorrectly placed in the binding up of the volume.

ge 48 of the 'Enquiries into common & vulgar Errors'  
 'late of Urns & the figure of the Quincunx,  bound  
 like, instead of being placed p. 48 of the Two last Treatises  
 the opening of the 'Cyrus Garden &c'—

Figure 11<sup>31</sup>

Coleridge expresses an admiration for Browne—'he has brains in his Head, which is all the more interesting for a *little Twist* in the Brains'—and an obvious fascination with Browne's focus on the Quincunx. According to William Hazlitt, Coleridge had read more into Browne's text on the Urn-burial than was there—and pursued the subject 'as it gave unlimited scope to his high-

<sup>30</sup> Mars? Venus 'shining red'? The 'bright torch of love' noted in Blake's poem *The Evening Star*? Prompted by Paul Cheshire's spirit of inquiry and investigated by Kevin Walsh of the Melbourne University School of Geography, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences it appears that this red planet was indeed Mars: 'for the date and time that you give [12 January 1803], at that location at 8 pm at night Greenwich Mean Time, Mars was well above the horizon. It was also reasonably close to Earth at that time. Mars was the only planet up at that time'; (Walsh email to the author, 3 May 2023; <https://www.fourmilab.ch/cgi-bin/Yoursky>).

<sup>31</sup> *CL* II 1083 (10 March 1804).

raised and shadowy imagination' (CL II 1082n.). And why not? Browne and the sign of the Quincunx offered Coleridge a riveting *twist* and segue into the sanctuary of sleep and to the closing of his letter to Sara.

### *Malta*

When Coleridge sailed for Malta on 9 April 1804, his knowledge of the fine arts was much greater than when he left for Germany in 1798, a proficiency gained through his close association with Sir George Beaumont, artist, and important art patron, begun in 1803 (STCFA 5–24). In a letter to John Rickman, two months earlier, Coleridge had written: 'I have learnt as much fr[om] Sir George respecting Pictures & Paintings and Painte[rs as] I ever learnt on any subject from man in the same Space and 'Time' (CL II 1063). Certainly, the drawing [below] included in his long letter to Southey, written on board the *Speedwell*, shows a decidedly more confident and stylish approach to his picturing than previously seen.

the Sea something like this—and just at



A where the fine stony M with a C lying on it's Back, begi

Figure 12<sup>32</sup>

The second of two drawings, it presents an outline of the Rock of Lisbon, and the mountain at its extreme interior which he ventures to be Cintra [now Sintra]. It is not by chance that Coleridge's first letter on this trip is to Southey, and that it includes a drawing of coastal Portugal, for Southey had resided in Portugal for several months in 1796 and published *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Spain and Portugal* (1797) out of his ramblings.

This imaginatively annotated drawing displays Coleridge's habitual turn to humour: "at A where the fine stony M with a C lying on its back. . . is a village or villages". It aligns well with a postscript to a letter written just 4½ months earlier (CL II 1028–31), in which Coleridge draws on local memories of the effects of 'two "Borsten Clouds"' on Keswick's mountainous landscape; of how the clouds 'left the History of their Doings'; observing how one high mountain side was 'now written over with Vees, Ys and Ws, of no easy erasure'

<sup>32</sup> CL II 1128 (16 April 1804).

and how, 'in winter time & after hard Rains they became Literae vocales with a vengeance'.<sup>33</sup>

In this drawing we have a harnessing of a range of modes characteristic of Coleridge, including the self-mocking pun, the cypher, the tour guide, and figurative language. It constitutes a considerable development on his earlier attempts at drawing; an admirable effort from one so ill at the time of its drawing. But what it lacks is colour. This is made evident in Coleridge's notebook entries on the corresponding dates where, on looking down from onboard the *Speedwell*, he writes ecstatically of the racing interplay of large and small islands of colours; 'green so bright and rich' and 'violet purple, equal in light & richness'—and finishes with the reflection, 'I thought of Sir G. Beaumont' (CN II 2015).

### *Conclusion*

Coleridge's foray into drawing began during his time in Germany, his first trip abroad, undertaken with the idea of publishing a travel journal. Coleridge clearly did not attempt a systematic approach to drawing, although engagement with the prevailing theories on painting, sketching, and the picturesque is evident. While the quantity of drawings included in his letters is limited<sup>34</sup>, they display a great variation in subject matter, reflecting numerous and overlapping tropes and concerns. They demonstrate an active interest in experimentation and constitute an additional elucidating device in his language tool kit, showing the generative capacities of drawing.

Starting off with straightforward pictograms, Coleridge moves on to schematic representations. His drawings display a more considered engagement when the subject has a strong personal association, e.g., the boys swinging around a pole, the evening walk to Lodore with Sara, or the rock of Lisbon. He clearly did not introduce pictures into his letters as preparatory works but as *aides-memoires* or personal devices for economically enhancing description beyond the scope of words. It is feasible that Coleridge initially intended to engage with drawing on a greater scale than transpired, but that this was derailed by the accumulation of difficulties experienced during his German tour, where he was disconnected, lonely and often unwell, and in the following years which saw him increasingly consumed with self-doubt, hopelessly in love, trapped by addiction and financial insecurity, and generally unwell.

<sup>33</sup> In referring to this in *Coleridge's Figurative Language*, Fulford observes that Coleridge wrote of 'how nature formed a language of its own, capable of transforming itself and not necessarily formulable in ordinary words' (1991, 81); Coleridge invites speculation. Might the drawing also, with 'a C lying on its back', be associated with the various punning forms of signature Coleridge came to use, such as the signature applied to the poem 'Chamouny; The Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn', published in the *Morning Post* in 1802? Coleridge explained the signature to Southey as 'He hath stood'—'no unmeaning Signature, if subscribed with humility, & in the remembrance of, Let him that stands take heed lest he fall'—However, it is in truth no more than S. T. C. written in Greek. Es tee see —' (CL II 867). See Fulford's 'Coleridge's Punning Signatures' (CFL 28–29).

<sup>34</sup> Extending the research to encompass all remaining drawings would undoubtedly introduce more operatives and complexities. Such an expansion would enable a more effective examination of the significant question: How did the introduction of drawings into his letter writing affect Coleridge's poesis?

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The final and most illegible of his drawings, the view of the harbour of Valetta from the palace window, seemingly marks the conclusion of his drawing endeavour. Here the skipping stone founders.<sup>35</sup> Yet Coleridge had far from lost his belief in the importance of drawing for, just months earlier, in a letter to his wife on 19 February 1804 (*CL* II 1068–71), he had made a precise request that Hartley be instructed in drawing:

I exceedingly wish, that there were anyone in Keswick who would give him a little instruction in the elements of drawing. I will go tomorrow, & enquire for some elementary book . . . that proposes to teach it without the assistance of a Drawing-Master—and which you might make him *read to you* instead of his other books. Sir G. Beaumont was very much pleased & interested by Hartley's promise for attachment to his darling Art.

Coleridge's hope was for Hartley to be what he could not be.

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<sup>35</sup> Over the next 30 years, with the waning of the urgency to draw, only 10 of the surviving letters carried Coleridge's small, quilled drawings.