Specters of Coleridge: Poetry, Biography, and the Ghost of Hope

Adam Neikirk

I HAVE WRITTEN A LONG POEM that answers the philosopher Thomas Nagel's important question, 'What is it like to be a bat?'; except the bat is Coleridge.[1] In this essay I consider the richness and complexity of a creative-critical approach to Coleridge's life and thought. My goal is not only to generate readerly interest in my currently unpublished poem, but also to open up discussion of some of the theoretical topics that crossed my mind during its composition.

Thinking about Coleridge

If a philosopher were to walk up to you and ask, 'What is it like to *be* Coleridge?', what would you answer? Nagel's essay, which has produced waves of scholarly responses since its publication in 1974, is fundamentally concerned with what he calls the 'subjective character of experience'.[2] As Nagel points out, such a character is 'not captured' by 'any explanatory system of functional states'.[3] Furthermore, while most of us would likely assent that 'bats have experience . . . people gradually shed their faith' in subjectivity 'if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree'.[4] The bat is somewhat well-positioned with respect to our willing suspension of disbelief concerning the reality of its experience: 'more closely related to us' than insects, perhaps, but still, says Nagel, 'an excited bat' feels like 'a fundamentally *alien* form of life'.[5]

On the other hand, an excited Coleridge tended to produce poems and other kinds of writing that most of us would not claim to understand on a basis of first-person experiential states. We can read his poems and talk about them, but could we reproduce, in our own consciousness, the visionary episode of 'Kubla Khan', or conceive of the narrative structure of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and then of the organizational impulses that divided it into quatrains of a compressed, highly imagistic character (if, indeed, this is even the proper description of how the poem was composed)? Furthermore, could we reproduce the environmental conditions that also gave rise to these poems: the (now-vanished) farmhouse at the end of the eighteenth century, in a time before the rise of industrial capitalism, when, just a few years prior, the author had dreamed of sailing to America to establish a socialist utopia in the undeveloped wilderness?[6]

Many people, probably most of them poets, have contemplated these sorts of questions from a distance. The poet might balk at the prospect of writing a

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[1] See Thomas Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?', *The Philosophical Review* 83.4 (1974): 435–50.
[2] Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?', 436.
[3] Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?', 436.
[4] Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?', 438.
[5] Nagel, 'What is it like to be a bat?', 438 (emphasis in original).
[6] Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Pantheon Books, 1989), 59–89.

poem, not in imitation of Coleridge—although this too—but through and during the imitation of Coleridge's (Coleridgean?) mental states, his subjective character, which cannot be described through 'explanatory system[s]'. Almost all modern humans, assuming they think about Coleridge for any length of time, will assume Coleridge's consciousness must have existed; but few, if any, will really attempt to imagine it for themselves, or, in the language of the current science of imagination, to 'elaborate' this consciousness.[7] This is not something I can incontrovertibly know, but I would argue that it is a safe assumption: there are simply too many conditions, both physical and psychological, to meet before we could begin to feel that we were even in the ballpark of a truly Coleridgean experience; and he is far higher up the phylogenetic tree than a bat.

But why is this? Coleridge's influence has been considerable since his death in 1834, and there is no end of literary-critical, philosophical, theological, and poetical responses to the writing he left behind. These too can be read and contemplated as more or less extended aspects of his subjectivity. His distance from us in historical time, ever growing, ought to be circumnavigable by way of the thousands of books and essays that have been written about his life and thought. We ourselves, we Coleridgeans, use our time and energy to get (we hope) closer to what he was trying to say, or what he was trying to do, and then we write about what that proximity teaches us. We hope that others will read what we have written and be able to do it again, perhaps more easily than before. And we feel that there is some essential value in this, I would argue, precisely because we value Coleridge's subjectivity itself, which, despite the hurdles, still exists on the horizons of our own imaginations. We value him as a person, and despite the efforts of time and modern life to render us into a 'post-historical' humanity, we want to carry him with us into the future, as far as we (and he) can travel.[8]

However, it is similarly arguable that his consciousness itself, not as a series of historical episodes through which he lived, but as a continuous, first-person experience in which he is still essentially living, remains almost entirely inaccessible. Some recent cultural critics would say that this is because it is becoming increasingly difficult to extend an imaginative sympathy into the past, even the very recent past. For some, this inability to get out of the present moment depends upon a mostly invisible scaffolding of what we might call psycho-material conditions. Mark Fisher writes in *Capitalist Realism* that 'capitalism . . . seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable', and that this transition really started in the 1980s.[9] According to this historical view of what can also be called 'postmodernity' or 'late capitalism', we live in an age in which our sense of the locality of the past, formerly active in and through the transformative aesthetics of modernism, has become 'a frozen . . . style' but can

[7] See, e.g., Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic, 2002), 44.
[8] Consider the work of Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
[9] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2014), 35.

never again be seen or felt 'as an ideal for living'.[10] Instead, we exist in a kind of ever-recurring present moment, haunted by nostalgia and intimations of mortality. According to Fisher, such an existence results 'when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics' of history.[11]

I think Coleridge, who derided the 'hunger-bitten and idea-less philosophy' of his own increasingly industrial, technocratic day, would have been concerned by such a collapse (*LS* 30). For him, as Peter Cheyne has pointed out, the 'primary imagination' carries an 'ontological capacity' by which human beings may 'hold and approach various modes of being'.[12] Indeed, it is imagination—the ability to see beyond what is and contemplate what might be—that 'meaningfully shape[s] the world' while we live in it.[13] Through poetry especially, the imagination 'writes life into things', but this requires something of their essence to be discerned, even if dimly.[14] The 'artefacts' of the imagination 'physically express or indicate ideas' that might otherwise remain obscure or inaccessible, leading to a situation in which poems, among other kinds of artworks, can reach through the present with ghostly hands.[15] They become, in effect, records of 'semi-transcendence', indicating periods where symbolic elaboration has been restored (i.e., as 'inspired' writing).[16] In these artefacts, the imagination 'beholds rather than consumes'; it 'penetrates details to reveal principles'.[17] The imagination, joined with what Coleridge called 'a superior voluntary control over it', in effect provides an important point of resistance to Fisher's consumer-spectatorism, taking us beyond the passive absorption in our immediate interests toward a more abiding knowledge of those enduring values coincident with human good (*BL* I 124–25).

Poems, therefore, can act not only as records of imaginative transcendence, but also as aids to our continuing struggle to envision a post-capitalist world. They do this by creating 'an affective response'; a poem's 'images, its syntactic patterns, its metaphors, [and] its subject matter' all work together in various 'combinations'[18] to allow for what Coleridge called 'constant activity of mind . . . as shall give greater pleasure to that which is already pleasurable' and 'bring within the bounds of pleasure that which would otherwise be painful' (*LLit* I 220). This is not to equate poetic reading with mere enjoyment, but it does sound like the opposite of the 'frozen', anhedonic modality that is symptomatic of capitalist consumption: poetic pleasure, rather than keeping us in the present, reaches through time (and space) to heal and cohere with 'past passion' (*CN* I 786). We can see this on display in the hauntological texts of 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', as

[10] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 35.
[11] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 32.
[12] Peter Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 114–115.
[13] Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy*, 115.
[14] Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy*, 116.
[15] Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy*, 116.
[16] Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy*, 116.
[17] Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy*, 116.
[18] Margaret H. Freeman, *The Poem as Icon: A Study in Aesthetic Cognition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 8.

well as 'Love', all poems that seek to 'revive within me' a formative past experience in order to bring it to bear on the present.[19] Coleridge wrote that poetry can be seen as a 'child scolding a flower in the words in which he had himself been scolded & whipt' (*CN* I 786). This complex image reveals poetry's essential connection to the past, and to 'past passion' as a form of 'painful' experience through which we learn to understand and also sympathize with the world and its denizens.

Coleridge's theory of poetic reading, indeed, sees pleasing verse as connected to the growth and development of moral feeling ('poetry results from that instinct the effort of perfecting ourselves') (*LLit* I 224). It is a dynamic theory, counteracting what Fisher calls 'the disappearance of the future' by reviving 'social imagination' in the union of the 'virtuality' of both past and future directions.[20] Cheyne argues, as well, that poetry's 'moral import . . . lies with how the poetry of everyday life sees values and ideals become daily bread'; he quotes Coleridge: 'The *Heart* should have *fed* upon the *truth*, as Insects on a Leaf'.[21] Thus it is that the 'ritual elaboration' denied to us by the collapse of belief is restored through daily participation in the life of ideas, acts that both give meaning and make us aware of how meaning can be made. Reading is such an act. By taking the 'purest parts' of poetry and 'combin[ing] it with our own minds', we attain something of what Coleridge calls the poet's 'common sensibility' (*LLit* I 224, 217) or *sensus communis*, which Rowan Boyson describes as having a socio-political dimension: this common sense, which both derives from and helps us to experience the pleasure of poetic reading, 'makes possible our relations with other people' and 'creates the generosity and hope which must underlie any kind of community'.[22]

Writing a poem, then, can be seen as committing to several different emancipatory positions, a couple of which I shall enumerate here. The first, described above as not fitting into a reductionist materialist paradigm, is phenomenological, concerned with exploring first person states of mind. A poet can situate their text not only outside of the present moment, but likewise, outside of what Nagel calls the 'view from nowhere', a fixed perspective of objectivity that exercises heavy skepticism about the existence of minds and mental states.[23] I would argue that to assume such a perspective in writing, in which the first-person point of view is uppermost or eventually emerges, can be seen as a political act, so long as the poem itself can be said to guide the reader toward a similar phenomenological access. Rather than beginning in the self as 'I', which, as Nagel says, might be equated, Descartes-like, to a 'pure, featureless mental receptacle', the poet can situate the 'self' as 'other' and try to

[19] 'Kubla Khan; or, A Vision in a Dream' in *PW* I.1 514; cf. *PW* I.1 365–419 and 509–14 and I.2 604–10. The word 'hauntology' is a Derridean philosophical pun (haunt + ontology) that implies the ghostly presence of the past within the present: a 'thinking of Being' that includes absence together with presence (Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf [New York: Routledge Classics, 1994], 32, 233).

[20] Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly* 66.1 (2012): 16.

[21] Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy*, 114; *CL* I 115 (emphasis in original); Cheyne notes that this image is used again in Coleridge (114 n.30; cf. *LPR* 49, *CN* IV 5270).

[22] Rowan Boyson, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 68.

[23] See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

write their way into it.[24] The question of what it is like to be another person not only assumes the existence of other minds, it also sees the separate and unique minds of others as forming categories or 'modes of being' toward which we exercise an imaginative contemplation of the unknown.

The second emancipatory position of poetics prioritizes the importance of style as mimesis. Whereas the view from nowhere wants to ask, 'what really exists?', a phenomenological poetics wants to understand 'what it is like' to be a person living in particularized physical and mental circumstances, with the caveat that 'living' is enmeshment within a biological and socialized world as well as (and at the same time) immersion in an irreducibly personal perspective. Here, the question of 'what is' cannot be separated from the Coleridgean question of 'what [it] means'. Asking 'what is it like to be Coleridge?' doubles down on such a commitment by taking as its subject a person to whom we have a limited, peculiar access by way of scholarly interest and literary-philosophical debate, as well as by the distances in time and space that open up when we begin to investigate the time period from 1772–1834 (that is, Coleridge's natural lifespan).[25] To study Coleridge is to imagine not just another person, but a person for whom the end of the world (styled as looming climate disaster, the unthinkable horizons of capitalist ways of life, the 'end of history' and so forth) hasn't happened yet. Rather, the end of the world, for Coleridge, was personal: 'A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear' (*PW* I.2 698).

In the next section, I will quote some excerpts of poetry from Coleridge and from my verse biography of him and will make some comments on the relationship of formal elements of the poem to the positions described above.

Thinking like Coleridge

To think like Coleridge, perhaps one must do more than read his writings: perhaps one needs to write like him, as well. This was one of the main premises of my doctoral thesis, which combined original creative writing with literary-critical research. Luckily, Coleridge's extant writings are voluminous, so there is plenty of material to learn from.

Coleridge is a poet of emotional texture, and he is always able to find an apt word or striking image to illustrate the ideas that undergird his verse. This is true even in his earlier poems. One of my favorite early pieces by Coleridge is the 'Sonnet: On Hope,' written together with Charles Lamb in late 1794.[26] However, before I had access to the *Collected Coleridge* version of the poetry, I had a paperback *Complete Poems* edited by William Keach.[27] In this book, 'Sonnet: On Hope' is called 'Sonnet ('Thou gentle look')' following the practice of calling untitled sonnets by their first line; and it was placed by Keach earlier

[24] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 33.

[25] Because he has been studied as a gifted artist and intellectual, we have more access to Coleridge than to an anonymous person, and yet, as I pointed out above, he is also in many ways alien to modern humans.

[26] *PW* I.1 153 (though J. C. C. Mays is uncertain about the poem's year of composition).

[27] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

in Coleridge's chronology, by my reckoning—probably in 1793.[28] Having read the poem many times since my interest in Coleridge was sparked some twelve years ago, I misremembered this poem's title as simply 'The gentle look', and thought of it as emblematic of the development of Coleridge's mature voice, which we see fully emerge in the conversation poems. So, while it is not the authoritative version, here is the version of the sonnet that formed my sense of Coleridge's expressive style:

> Thou gentle Look, that didst my soul beguile,
> Why hast thou left me? Still in some fond dream
> Revisit my sad heart, auspicious Smile!
> As falls on closing flowers the lunar beam:
> What time, in sickly mood, at parting day
> I lay me down and think of happier years;
> Of Joys, that glimmered in Hope's twilight ray,
> Then left me darkling in a vale of tears.
> O pleasant days of hope – for ever gone! –
> Could I recall you! – But that thought is vain.
> Availeth not Persuasion's sweetest tone
> To lure the fleet-winged Travellers back again:
> Yet fair, though faint, their images shall gleam
> Like the bright Rainbow on a willowy stream.[29]

Despite this poem's status as an early work—almost but not quite juvenilia—in Coleridge's *oeuvre*, it contains some imagery, a mood, and a theme that I would argue he returned to repeatedly throughout his life.

Coleridge uttered the complaint 'Why has thou left me?' over and over again, usually directed toward other people: Robert Southey, Sara Hutchinson, William Wordsworth. But who is he talking to in this sonnet? The image of moonlight falling on 'closing flowers' describes the central problem of 'Dejection: an Ode', composed several years later: the 'lunar beam' is beautiful, but does not nourish the flowers, which are either unable or refuse to remain open at night (perhaps like the tavern in which this poem may have been written). The 'twilight' mood of this poem is central to Coleridge's poetic sensibility, which thrives in liminal spaces (like a tavern). A personified 'Hope' is always leaving, never arriving, and the fall of night is close at hand. The best lines from a good poem that has been ill-treated, 'To Two Sisters: A Wanderer's Farewell', are:

[28] The Penguin *Complete Poems* lacks a poetical chronology. Keach places 'Sonnet ("Thou gentle look")' between 'Kisses' and 'Sonnet to the River Otter'. In the *Collected Coleridge*, Mays titles 'Kisses' as 'Cupid Turn'd Chymist' and provides 'Jul 1793 or earlier' as the date of composition (*PW* I.1 94); Mays names 'Sonnet to the River Otter' as 'Sonnet: To the River Otter', dating it to 'Aug–Nov 1796? 1793?' and commenting, 'The date of composition is something of a mystery' (*PW* I.1 299).

[29] Coleridge, *The Complete Poems* (ed. Keach), 45.

> Hope long is dead to me! an Orphan's Tear
> Love wept despairing o'er his Nurse's Bier.
> Yet still she flutters o'er her Grave's green slope:
> For Love's Despair is but the Ghost of Hope! (*PW* I.2 838)

These hesitantly buoyant lines could be said to mimic the scraping sound of a body attempting to leave its coffin in the spondaic 'Grave's green slope' ('let! me! out!'), and Coleridge's revelation that 'Ghost' and 'Hope' sound alike is part of the metaphysical ground of the text world shared throughout his poems. The exclamatory lines in Coleridge, likewise, are gothic pieces designed to capture the horror of suddenly seeing something that shouldn't exist; he did this so poignantly in 'Christabel', for example, that he scared the wits out of Percy Bysshe Shelley.[30] The placement of exclamation in the stanzas and sonnets is important, too: 'Could I recall you!' is cancelled by the second half of the pentameter line as 'vain', a sympathy echoed by Wordsworth in his conclusion to the River Duddon sonnet sequence: 'Vain sympathies!'.[31] Furthermore, 'Could I recall you' is a kind of self-quotation without quotation marks, used to set off an abrupt change of sentiment that occurs self-critically within the selfsame line; like recalling a *faux pas* you wish you'd left unsaid. Enthusiasm, emblematized as exclamation, is misplaced when it occupies half a line or less, but a full line given this treatment should be taken as having the resonance of an awful prophecy ('Revisit my sad heart, *auspicious* Smile!').

In 'The Gentle Look', however, it is through Coleridge's 'swimming' gaze that we look upon a hope that still lingers, and we can successfully think through poetical metaphor (*PW* I.1 455). 'As falls on closing flowers the lunar beam' is an example of the compressive cognition of verse, allowing rough and ready thinkable complexity in an image. This is nearer one end of the dynamic pole that Peter Cheyne associates with 'Coleridge's two-level theory of the higher and lower levels of mind',[32] the other being 'Activity of Thought scattering itself in jests, puns, & sportive nonsense' (*CL* III 337). So, Coleridge's poetical voice tends to swing between jests, unattributed self-quotations, and other kinds of speech acts (such as the 'Well!' from the opening lines of 'Dejection') and bleary-eyed contemplation of a world that has a special, numinous 'Look'; and for which, I suggest, pentameter lines are often the best vehicle to make these transcendent or semi-transcendent visions communicable to others. This is due in part to the unevenness of pentameter lines, on which George T. Wright has commented, 'pentameter is itself the most problematical line-length', because 'it does not divide readily into two shorter rhythmical units'.[33] Coleridge's sonnets, and, in general, his poetry of

[30] This happened in 1816. As Lord Byron, Percy and Mary Shelley and others were reading 'Christabel' aloud on a dark and stormy night, the phrase 'A sight to dream of, not to tell!' sent PBS running from the room in terror (see Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1998], 437).

[31] William Wordsworth, 'The River Duddon: Conclusion', *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 183.

[32] Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy*, 162.

[33] George T. Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 3–4.

biographical situatedness—the conversation poems, but also 'Lines written at Dove Cottage', 'Constancy to an Ideal Object', 'Lines connected with the Grasmere Circle', 'Written at Coleorton', and 'To William Wordsworth', among others—often draw on what Wright calls the pentameter's superior ability to invoke a 'complex understanding, as if the speakers of such lines were aware of more than they ever quite say'.[34] Coleridge, as I have suggested, is frequently aware of the contingency and fragility of his own domestic situations, but his poetic voice resounds and doubles back on itself as if to ward off the coming change.

In writing a verse biography, especially one focused on phenomenological first-person situatedness, it was important to consider the relationship between form and immersion. Immersion is not a concept that has been explored deeply with relation to poetry, especially as an effect of versification. Yet, Coleridge himself broached the topic in *Biographia Literaria*, writing of 'the even flow . . . of single lines' as 'injurious to the total effect' of a long poem, saying that reading a poem ought to resemble 'the motion of a serpent', by which one glides or flows across the sand (the surface of the verse) like water (*BL* II 196, 14). In general, he was concerned that poetry's power to foreground language can distract us from a 'retrogressive' but ultimately forward movement through the poem (*BL* II 14), a view that has been echoed by contemporary cognitive-scientific theories of poetic reading.[35] Mimesis in a poetic account of a text-world (such as the Quantocks, *circa* 1797) reflects the shape of reality, but is itself shaped and determined by poetic form, being dependent on a skillful handling of what Wright calls 'line-flow', i.e. the question of how lines flow into one another and give rise to logical and metaphysical superveniences.[36] Tess Somervell describes long poems as 'spatially extended landscape[s]' in her recent monograph on the subject, and one way to conceptualize a verse biography of Coleridge (as a long poem) is that it is a mimetic landscape populated by forms of Coleridgean ideality.[37]

Similarly, it was important to consider the place of poetical meter as a tool for exploring and explicating phenomenological and biographical situations. I chose to write my biography in pentameter verse because I believed, as Wright does, that this type of line is well-suited to carry 'significant English speech' due to its 'amplitude and asymmetry'.[38] I also wanted to write a biography, as a poem working through what Oren Isenberg calls 'the ontological problem of constitutively first-person experiences' and 'the epistemological problem of

[34] Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art*, 5.

[35] See, for example, Arthur M. Jacobs, 'Toward a neurocognitive poetics model of literary reading', *Cognitive Neuroscience of Natural Language Use*, ed. Roel M. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 135–59. For the prescience of Coleridge's writings on poetry and the mind, see Mark J. Bruhn, 'Romanticism and the cognitive science of imagination', *Studies in Romanticism* 48.4 (2009): 543–64.

[36] Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art*, 13. This is a complex idea that needs more attention than I can afford it here. A good starting point is the work of Susan J. Wolfson, especially *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1999); also, *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[37] Tess Somervell, *Reading Time in the Long Poem: Milton, Thomson, and Wordsworth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 4.

[38] Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art*, 6.

third-person access to first-person states'[39] in the context of a hauntological view of literary history. Characters speaking there, bridging time and space with pentameters, would seem to be saying more 'than even' they were 'aware of'.[40] What I did not set out to do was directly imitate Coleridge—at least not in all parts of the biography. Like 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', although that is not a pentametrical poem, it is written somewhat 'in imitation of the *style*, as well as of the spirit' of the poetry of a different age.[41] Yet, despite that, I feel as if it is a vehicle for my own voice—a contemporary voice—as well.

The biography opens with lines that narrate the creation of a fledgling text world at the end of time:

> As theirs is our own, so we write for them
> One song which at the end of all things sings:
> Because we stand upon the lonely ship
> Moored in the sea of its own making, we bless
> With soft awareness of what passes by
> And what will pass away.[42]

It also contains areas of a reflexive self-awareness, and moments when the form is broken (or at least altered):

> I for one, a star, am tired and red, and old, and cannot, from my furnished height,
> Bring any more to your sad world my light;
> But that I would! O—burning deep within
> I fuse and fuse, and make my ideas dim.[43]

It contains dialogue, which sometimes reflects Coleridge's penchant for doing impressions:

> 'Why, that minds me o' the time
> I was up in London, see, with Charlie Lamb,
> Old drinkin' mate o' mine, and we conceived
> Of a wild scheme[44]

Similarly, what I wanted to do in this poem, which sets it off from a traditional prose biography, was give the characters—especially S.T.C.—a chance to interrupt the narration and imbue it with their own subjectivity (hence its title, *Your Very Own Ecstasy*). As I stated above, I see this as an emancipatory

[39] Oren Izenberg, 'Poems out of our Heads', *PMLA* 123.1 (2008): 220.
[40] Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art*, 5.
[41] *PW* I.1 367. This also appeared in Coleridge's advertisement to the poem in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*.
[42] Adam Neikirk, *Your Very Own Ecstasy: A Life in Verse of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 'Your Very Own Ecstasy: A Life in Verse of Samuel Taylor Coleridge' (PhD thesis, University of Essex, 2023), I.1 (lines 1–6).
[43] Neikirk, *Your Very Own Ecstasy*, III 163.
[44] Neikirk, *Your Very Own Ecstasy*, II 96.

strategy, privileging the porousness of the human mind, inviting an encounter with multiple subjectivities, and being hospitable to the ghosts of an age that we may now scarcely imagine (except in the guise, as Charles Taylor has pointed out, of the irrational).[45] Although Coleridge is introduced as a child in Ottery St. Mary, 'A little lovesick boy with sad grey eye',[46] it isn't long before he wrests the perspective away from the narrator while reflecting on his uncooperative wife, Sarah:

> One gentle look! Of loving kindness bright,
> With wifely interest, and a sister's crook
> To lead him from this empty vale of woe!
> Then might he come to life again, and feel
> The power of a husband's duty weigh
> Upon his breast with saving influence.
> But no: such thoughts, like thoughts, are all
> In vain [. . .]
>
> And yet, I feel
> That I will come around, and see it through (somehow);
> That no matter the distance which the light is fled,
> Wisdom and pure intentions will ne'er desert me;
> And the way, that she is looking at me now!
> I know we can be happy.[47]

Sarah's 'gentle look' is what Coleridge desires, but his mood is mercurial, and he tests the weight of his melancholy against her power to lift his spirits: 'And yet, I feel'. His intervention into the poem at this point is one that recurs variously until the end, but other characters also get a chance to enter into dialogue with him and perform poetical speeches of their own, including Sarah (Fricker) Coleridge, Robert Southey, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Sara Hutchinson, Hartley Coleridge, Charles Lamb, the Christ's Hospital headmaster James Bowyer, Captain Findlay (of the *Speedwell*), and an unnamed angel who visits Coleridge toward the end of the poem.

The Coleridges' strained but frequently loving (if ill-fated) marriage acts as a meta-commentary on the poem's 'factional' position between historical account and poetical invention.[48] Similarly, Colin Jager has recently shown that

[45] See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 269.
[46] Neikirk, *Your Very Own Ecstasy*, I 6.
[47] Neikirk, *Your Very Own Ecstasy*, II 84–86.
[48] Scholars have debated recently whether the genre of 'faction', that is, completely factual literature, represents another type of doomed marriage as a form of writing, or if it can be fruitful. Oliver Conolly and Bashshar Haydar argue that 'the requirement of factual accuracy impedes the aims of literary form' and that 'factual accuracy' is not a 'literary value'. On the other hand, Toni Bruce has argued that 'producing faction [is] a powerful way' of 'challenging dominant cultural narratives'. Conolly and Haydar, 'The case against faction', *Philosophy and Literature* 32.2 (2008): 347–58; see also, Toni Bruce, 'The Case for Faction as a Potent Method for Integrating Fact and Fiction in Research', *Innovations in Narrative and Metaphor: Methodologies and Practices*, eds. Sandy Farquhar and Esther Fitzpatrick (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2019): 57–72.

British Romanticism was a period consciously aware of the power of unrealized, even unconscious histories;[49] and Susan J. Wolfson has located a self-interrogative power of the ideological in Romantic verse forms and especially in Coleridgean simile.[50] Perhaps it makes sense, then, to interrogate Romantic subjectivity itself through one of its expressive literary forms, using Coleridge's life as a kind of 'waymeet' to track the coming and going of fields of force, both historical and arising from an imagined subjectivity, 'the one life within us and abroad' (*PW* I.1 233). It isn't necessary to reduplicate Coleridge's views of poetry, his early radical politics, or his use of language to tell the story of his life, as Richard Holmes and other biographers have shown. But telling the story does entail, I would suggest, an attempt to see his life not as some neutral observer, but from the inside of whatever affective and logical schemas he created and left behind in extant writings. To write from these fragmentary pieces into similar positions, in verse, requires what Katy Shaw has called 'an ethical act of hospitality without reserve':[51]

> Meanwhile my Friend, so old and yet so young,
> Will live in these crude spaces like a ghost,
> A benefactor, and a spirit-guide,
> Who has no truck with death, but merely wears
> By virtue of the soft and living power
> Of his own love, sheen and transparency,
> A vision into all the ways of life[52]

[49] Colin Jager, *Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).
[50] Wolfson, *Formal Charges,* 63–100.
[51] Katy Shaw, *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 17.
[52] Neikirk, *Your Very Own Ecstasy*, II 1722–28.