SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE (1772-1834)

LIFE.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born at Ottery St. Mary, Devon, October 21, 1772. He received his early education at Christ’s hospital, where the reading in his seventeenth year of Bowles’s Sonnets gave him his first taste of poetry freed from the influences of classicism. At nineteen he went to Cambridge; fell into debt and despondency; ran away, and under an assumed name enlisted in the Dragoons. He soon obtained his discharge, but though he returned for a short time to Cambridge, he left (1794) without taking his degree. Inspired by the Revolution he now joined Southey in a scheme, which quickly collapsed, for the establishment of an ideal society, to be called a Pantisocracy, on the banks of the Susquehanna river. In 1795 he married Sarah (or Sara) Fricker, whose sister Edith a few weeks later became Southey’s wife. In 1796 he published a volume of poems and started a periodical, which died at the tenth issue for want of funds. His friendship with Wordsworth began in 1797. After nearly two years in Germany (1798-9), during which time he steeped himself in German thought, he returned to England with many designs for great philosophical treatises but no settled plans for the immediate future. Continual ill-health and family unhappiness brought on profound depression of spirits, and in an evil hour he sought relief from bodily pain and mental anguish in laudanum.

This completed his undoing. Henceforth for many years his life was one vain struggle against the fatal habit which had him in its grip, ceaseless wanderings in search of health, domestic discord, broken promises, and vague dreaming over vast works which were never even begun. He tried journalism, and launched a weekly paper, The Friend, which reached only twenty seven numbers; he lectured on Shakespeare and other subjects with varying success. From 1816 to the end he lived almost entirely under the roof and care of Dr. Gillman at Highgate, who helped him to break the chains of his slavery to laudanum and restored him to a measure of health and happiness. In these last years he became the oracle of many pilgrims from far and near, who returned to Highgate to listen to his marvellous talk. He died July 23, 1834.

(HIS MOST IMPORTANT) WORKS.

VERSE.
Poems (1796)
The Ancient Mariner (in Lyrical Ballads, 1798)
Translation of Schiller’s Wallenstein (1800)
Remorse (1813)
Cristabel, Kubla Khan, etc. (1816)
Sibylline Leaves (1817)

Prose.-
The Friend (1809-10)
The Statesman’s Manual (1816)
Biographia Literaria (1817)
Aids to Reflection (1825)
Confessions of an Enquiring Spirit (1844)
Essay on Method (1845)
Table Talk (1884)
Anima Poetae (1895)

Character.-
Coleridge is one of the most pathetic figures in English literature. He was a man of stupendous and many-sided genius and fine sensitive moral nature. But he was by temperament indolent, erratic, and visionary: ill-health and mental depression early impaired his powers of work. The laudanum habit paralysed his intellect and will, and undermined his sense of honour, and self-respect. For the greater part of his life he was a mere drifter, an ineffective dreamer of dreams, a burden to his friends, and often a pensioner upon their bounty. To complete the tragedy, the knowledge of his pitiful failure weighed heavily upon him.

Views.-
Coleridge began life as an ardent supporter of the Revolution, and his first volume of verse loudly proclaimed his democratic enthusiasm. But disillusion soon set in, and, like Wordsworth, he became politically conservative. With Wordsworth, however, a profound interest in concrete humanity survived the wreckage of his early hopes. Coleridge, though he retained his interest in the general concerns of the nation, wanted precisely that intense sympathy with individual men and women. His tendency to live among abstractions was further strengthened by his devotion to metaphysics and theology.
In his theory of poetry he emphasized the aesthetic quality as the primary consideration:

Poetry is an art … of representing, in words, external nature and human thoughts and affections, both relatively to human affections, by the production of as much immediate pleasure in parts, as is compatible with the largest sum of pleasure in the whole. (*Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*, II.)

The poet, therefore, must convey truth indirectly through the medium of pleasure:

The communication of pleasure is the introductory means by which alone the poet must expect to moralize his readers. (*Biographia Literaria*, ch. XXII)

He adopts Milton’s conception of poetry:

It is essential to poetry that it should be simple, and appeal to the elements and primary laws of our nature. That it should be sensuous, and by its imagery elicit truth at a flash. That it should be impassioned, and be able to move our feelings and awaken our affections. (*Lectures on Poetry*)

Regarding the language of poetry, he agrees with Wordsworth’s “remonstrance in behalf of truth and nature,” but entirely rejects his special theories. The language of poetry must necessarily differ from that of prose, while the best language for poetic purposes is not to be found among the rustic and uneducated classes (*Biographia Literaria*, Ch. XVII, XVIII.).

**Poems.**

Personal Poems.-
Among these are several – Dejection, Youth and Age, and Work without Hope, to name some of the most famous ones – which have a pathetic interest as expressions of the poet’s sense of failure and sterility. Others, like The Nightingale and The Lime-Tree Bower my Prison, are touching memorials of friendship, dating from a time when life was still full of happiness and hope. Frost at Midnight, belonging to the same period, enshrines a father’s tender love for his infant child.

Political Poems.-
In The Destruction of the Bastille, written before he left Christ’sd Hospital, Coleridge welcomed the Revolution in declamatory verse. The Ode on the Departing Year (1796), begins “with an address to the Divine Providence that regulates into one vast harmony all the events of time,” and closes by prophesying “in a spirit of anguish” the approaching downfall of England. In France, an Ode (1798), first printed as The Recantation, Coleridge traces his relations with the Revolution and proclaims an ideal of individual liberty to be reached only through obedience to the moral law. Fears in Solitude was written in the same year “during the alarm of an invasion,” and contains an explanation of the poet’s patriotism.

Romantic Poems.-
Kubla Khan is a fragment of wonderful pictorial and verbal magic. According to Coleridge’s own account, it represents all that he could recall of a dream. On waking, he hastened to write down the lines which had come to him during sleep. Unfortunately he was interrupted by “a person on business from Porlock” after which nothing remained to him but “some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision.” Christabel, a story of witchcraft, also unfinished, is like the foregoing a creation rare and delicate beauty. Part I. was written in 1797, Part II. in 1800, after which Coleridge waited in vain for a return of the inspiration. Its versification, though not in fact so original as he supposed, gave a fresh model to English poetry.

The metre … is not, properly speaking, irregular, though it may seem so from its being founded on a new principle, namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables. Though the latter may vary from seven to twelve, yet in each line the accents will be found to be only four. (*Preface*)

Scott, who heard Christabel recited while it was still in manuscript, was influenced by it in The Lady of the Last Minstrel. The Ancient Mariner is the Tale of a curse which the narrator, the Mariner himself, brings down upon himself and his companions by wantonly killing an albatross. Coleridge’s power of handling the supernatural is, like the pure music of his verse, as wonderful here as in Christabel. The moral involved in the story and specifically brought out at the end, is that of all-embracing love.

**Characteristics.-**
Coleridge’s poetry represents the culmination of early romanticism in its purest form. Historically he belongs to the mediaeval revival, but he is far too original to be classified as part of a movement, and the distinctive qualities of his work are all his own. In pictorial power, felicity of phrasing, and word music he is one of the greatest masters. In his subtly suggestive treatment of the supernatural he stands almost alone. It is not only that he eliminates from his supernaturalism the crude material horrors then popular with writers of the romantic school: he also gives it a psychological foundation. In describing the plan of Lyrical Ballads he writes:

It was agreed that my endeavour should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of the imagination that willing suspension of belief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith. – (Biographia Literaria, ch. XIV.)

This is particularly apparent in The Ancient Mariner, the backbone of which is provided, not by the marvels of the narrative, but by the spiritual history of the hero. Wordsworth sought to save naturalism from the hard literalism of Crabbe by touching reality with imagination. Coleridge redeemed romance from coarse sensationalism by linking it with psychological truth.

Coleridge’s best poetry is almost entirely the product of a brief period of wonderful activity (1797-9). Yet small as it is in bulk, it ranks among the rarest treasures of literature. As a literary critic he is unsystematic, but stimulating and suggestive. He did much to establish the romantic attitude towards literature, and he gave an entirely new direction to English Shakespearean criticism. Though rambling, discursive, and unsatisfying as a whole, his Biographia Literaria contains some chapters which for penetration and grasp of fundamental principles could not easily be surpassed. In philosophy and theology he is to be reckoned a chief force in breaking down the rationalistic tradition of the 18th century and impregnating English contemporary thought with German transcendentalism. By his scattered writings, and even more by his talk, he exercised and enormous influence over many young men who were to be spiritual leaders in the next generation.