

## The Performance of Romantic Criticism: S. T. Coleridge in the Lecture Theatre

Veronika Ruttkay

The vanity of criticism, like all other vanities, except that of dress, (which so far has an involuntary philosophy in it) is always forgetting that we are at least half made up of body.

(Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, qtd. in Pite 55)

O heaven!—words are wasted to those that feel and to those who do not feel the exquisite judgement of Sh[akespeare]— . . . (Coleridge, *Lectures 2*: 295)

For anyone wanting to collect evidence for Coleridge's anti-theatrical sentiment, his lectures on Shakespeare, delivered between 1808 and 1819, would be a good place to start.<sup>1</sup> According to the *Bristol Gazette*, for instance, he asserted on one occasion that "he never saw any of Shakespeare's plays performed, but with a degree of pain, disgust, and indignation" (*Lectures 1*: 563). Coleridge went on to list external causes that he thought responsible for his discontent, such as "the enormous size and monopoly of the theatres" which produced "many bad and but few good actors." On another occasion, he "in the warmest language, censured those who had attempted to alter the works of Shakespeare, in order to accommodate him to modern ears" (*Lectures 1*: 254). The staging of adaptations was only the most obvious way of losing touch with the "real" Shakespeare; similarly harmful was the practice of neglecting inferior characters, "thro' which our poet shone no less conspicuously & brightly" (*Lectures 1*: 254), while concentrating wholly on the protagonists. According to the critic Julie Carlson, the nineteenth-century star system, which was behind this phenomenon, was especially disconcerting for Coleridge, because it could lead to a few star actors and, even worse, actresses, outshining Shakespeare, their bodily presence becoming more emphatic than the text that was supposed to sustain them (20). Coleridge ruefully remarked that "those who went to the Theatre in our own day, when any of our poet's works were represented, went to see *Mr Kemble* in *Macbeth*,—or *Mrs Siddons' Isabel*" or, even worse, "to hear speeches usurped by fellows who owed their very elevation to dexterity in snuffing candles" (*Lectures 1*: 254, emphasis in the original). In such circumstances Coleridge considered it fortunate that Shakespeare was not performed more often, for thus he could "find his proper place, in the heart and in the closet" (*Lectures 1*: 563).

It is not difficult to recognise in such remarks a more general aversion to the predominance of what is public and external in matters poetical.<sup>2</sup> According to Coleridge, Shakespeare relied "on his own imagination" when he created his characters,

and spoke “not to the senses as was now done, but to the mind. He found the stage as near as possible a closet, & in the closet only could it be fully & completely enjoyed” (*Lectures* 1: 254). References to the private space of the “closet,” the inner recesses of the “heart” and “mind,” coupled with the possessive tone of such utterances, seem to suggest that Coleridge, like other critics of his age, privileged a more or less stable and privatised Shakespeare, over a mutable or even mutilated public one. The “private” Shakespeare found its proper embodiment in the book that one could own and read in solitude.<sup>3</sup> However, to adapt two terms used by Michael Fried in his study of eighteenth-century aesthetics, romantic “absorption” was inseparable from certain forms of “theatricality” (Russell and Tuite 6-9). Other critics, like Peter Manning and Gillian Russell, have recently pointed out that Coleridge gave his most influential cues for “closet” reading in situations that were recognisably theatrical. His lectures were public performances of Shakespeare interpretation given by (as one contemporary put it) “the celebrated Mr. Coleridge” (Perry, *Interviews* 117)—although the element of theatricality could be obscured by its very success. In what follows, I am going to take a look at the ambiguous theatricality of Coleridge’s lectures, by focusing on a few aspects which, I would contend, also have a bearing on elements of his critical approach to Shakespeare. A recurrent theme will be the role of affective rhetoric in both the construction of his lecturing scenario and in the fashioning of his task as a critic.

## Criticism as Performance

“A Theatre, in its widest sense is the *general* Term for all places of amusement thro’ the Eye or Ear, when people assemble in order to be entertained by others, all at the same time, & in common” (*Lectures* 1: 129). Coleridge’s lectures seem to meet his own criteria, with some minor qualifications. In the lecture theatre, there is only one entertainer, himself, who demonstrates the *intellectual* pleasures of poetry in front of his audience. In other words, the entertainment is also, potentially, a means of instruction. A newspaper report of his lecture on *Romeo and Juliet* emphasizes this double purpose, suggesting that for some listeners entertainment might have come first: “Mr. C. hence drew a moral equally salutary to our youths, and honourable to our maidens, were they but as ready to profit by his lessons as to enjoy the eloquence by which they are inculcated” (*Lectures* 1: 320). Reports and reminiscences demonstrate that audiences attended Coleridge’s lectures as much for the sake of sociable entertainment as for the sake of self-improvement. Characteristically, commentators often divided teaching and delighting between male and female audiences. “If the female part of his audience be sometimes disappointed,” a reporter remarked, “they are sometimes agreeably surprised. For a cross wind and current of thought and feeling, will frequently drive the lecturer from the most rugged and masculine philosophy, into the calm and captivating confines of the circle of the affections, and the influences of the heart” (Perry, *Interviews* 153). As this passage suggests, a casual drifting between

“feeling” and “philosophy” was one of the appeals of Coleridge’s lectures, which—like most public lectures at the time—were designed to attract women as much as men.

In her essay on romantic lecturing Gillian Russell has argued that in private institutions like the Royal, the Philosophical and the Surrey, which had a mostly professional middle-class membership, the presence of women guaranteed the polite and quasi-domestic sociability that the proprietors sought to maintain (137-38). For Coleridge, female auditors and the connection they represented between lecturing and the domestic sphere seem to have been especially important. His 1818 “Prospectus” declares that one of the aims of his course is to contribute “to the entertainment of the social board, and the amusement of the circle at the fire-side” by offering “rules and principles of sound judgement” in taste (39-40). This may sound more like a promise addressed to male audiences who wished to converse on literary topics in “mixed society,” as the “Prospectus” put it. But at other times Coleridge directly appealed to women’s sensibilities. Henry Crabb Robinson recounts how during a lecture on the origin of the fine arts he “atoned for his metaphysics by his gallantry: he declared that the passion for dress in females has been the cause of the civilization of mankind” (*Lectures* 1: 114). Considering that women had been thought of, however controversially, as civilizing agents by a number of Enlightenment philosophers (including Hume), it is possible that Coleridge’s “gallantry” might have had philosophical foundations.<sup>4</sup> But, as Robinson makes clear, such remarks were also sound social tactics. If Coleridge was to make a living as a lecturer, one of the first things he had to learn was to find a way to address women in the audience.

Coleridge’s contemporary, Katherine Thomson records an interesting example of the negotiations this involved. At the Royal Institution in 1808, Coleridge “turned towards the fair and noble heads” in the lecture-room (“there were some hundreds of ladies present”) to apologize for his previous lecture, adding “that the Muses would not have been old maids, except for want of dowry.” As Thomson recalls, the “witticism was received with as much applause as a refined audience could decorously manifest, and the harangue proceeded” (Perry, *Interviews* 120). In other words, Coleridge on this occasion managed to get away with some impertinence (and even to make a reference to the commercial side of his venture), establishing a bond of implicit understanding between himself and his listeners. The anecdote, however, also calls attention to the risks incurred in using this kind of familiar tone in front of a public that was not homogenous, either socially or in terms of gender and education. As Lucy Newlyn has argued, the strategy Coleridge developed to deal with this problem involved re-inventing his audience as a circle of friends, who were allowed a glimpse into his private thoughts, because they were somehow already favourably predisposed towards him. Newlyn quotes Coleridge on his 1813 Clifton series—“I have made Friends of them all” (*Lectures* 2: 3)—suggesting that “[s]ympathy and friendship were expected as part of the intimate bonding between speaker and listener which

he wished to establish” (87). But, as she also observes, Coleridge’s notes attest to a constant struggle between a sought-for intimacy and the dread of self-exposure.

In a note written for the 1808 series at the Royal Institution, Coleridge addresses his (imaginary) listeners as “affectionate Guardians” who “see without disgust the awkwardness, and witness with sympathy the growing pains, of a youthful Endeavor” (*Lectures* 1: 75). In another, he scripts a long apology that is far less self-assured than the one recalled by Thomson, one that includes a philosophical discussion of remorse and regret, and ends on a note of pathos:

These reflections occurred to me from the exceeding depression, which I felt this morning previous to my appearing before [you], accompanied with [a] painful sense of self-dissatisfaction bordering on self-reproach. I could not but be conscious to how severe a Trial I had put your patience & candour in my last Lecture—and tho’ it was thro’ severe & still lingering bodily Indisposition . . .—yet I could not drive away the despondence of self-condemnation—and when during the time I have now been addressing you, my mind gradually regained its buoyancy, I felt an increasing Impulse, which I have thus yielded to, to attempt to remove from your feelings the disappointment from the Past by hopes of something less unworthy of your attention in my future Lectures. (*Lectures* 1: 65)

More than anything, this is a dramatic monologue: a public confession to be spoken at the coming lecture in full earnest, envisioning and also conjuring for himself a moment of relief and inspiration. Such notes strongly suggest that Coleridge’s lectures ought to be thought of as performances which he sometimes rehearsed in writing, but which acquired their full force only in the lecture theatre (hence their connection with performative genres such as the confession). The entire passage both enacts and theorizes the emotional “drama” of remorse, and is in this sense related to Coleridge’s plays, *Osorio*, and its later version *Remorse*, which was staged at Drury Lane in January 1813, simultaneously with his lecture course at the Surrey Institution. Analysis of feeling through self-dramatization—with the hope of spiritual renewal—is an important feature of both the play and the lecture notes.

Coleridge the lecturer was author, character and actor at the same time, even if he managed to convince most of his listeners to regard this composite being as Coleridge “himself.”<sup>5</sup> To a large extent, his success depended on the air of spontaneous thinking and sincere self-expression, and he performed this so convincingly that his roles as “author” and “actor” went mostly unnoticed, while he established himself as one of the most important literary characters in London (a “character” that lent itself for literary treatment remarkably well).<sup>6</sup> Henry Crabb Robinson tellingly writes that, on one occasion, he was “very eloquent and popular on the general character of Shakespeare: he is recovering lost character among the Saints” (*Lectures* 1: 496). The repetition of “character” here suggests how much Coleridge’s public image depended

on his interpretation of Shakespeare; audiences (in this case, mostly Dissenters at the Surrey) were eager to draw Coleridge's portrait, while the critic was sketching that of Shakespeare. Or, in the words of Peter J. Manning, "[i]f readers saw Shakespeare through Coleridge, they also watched Coleridge create an image of himself: to lecture on the genius of Shakespeare, under these particular conditions, was an occasion for the performance of contemporary genius" (236).

The rhetorical blending of the functions of author, actor, and character can be witnessed in Chapter 10 of *Biographia Literaria*, where the lectures play a crucial role in a complicated apology for Coleridge's literary life. Wishing to prove that books are not "the only channel through which the stream of intellectual usefulness can flow" (1: 220), Coleridge gives a memorable description of the opening night of *Remorse*, when he observed "that the pit and the boxes were crowded with faces familiar to [him]" from his lectures (1: 221). By stating this, he tactically subordinates his status as an author to that of a lecturer, resulting in a series of mirroring effects: members of the audience are recognised by the author who, in turn, had been watched by them as a lecturer, and whose play is to be watched by both. Through these bonds of watching and recognition, Coleridge's public success at the theatre is turned into private pleasure; "the complete success of the REMORSE on the first night of its representation," he claims, did not give him "as great or as heart-felt a pleasure" as his discovery of the familiar faces (1: 221). Timothy Webb has noted that Coleridge obscures the distinction between theatre and lecture theatre not only in the *Biographia*, but in his private writing as well (19). As his lecture series had come to its end, he reported to his wife:

I concluded my Lectures last night most triumphantly, with loud, long, & enthusiastic applauses at my Entrance, & ditto in yet fuller Chorus as and for some minutes after, I had retired. It was lucky, that (as I never once thought of the Lecture, till I had entered the Lecture Box) the two last were the most impressive, and really the best. I suppose that no dramatic Author ever had so large a number of unsolicited, unknown, yet *predetermined* Plauditors in the Theatre, as I had on Saturday Night. One of the malignant Papers asserted, that I had collected all the *Saints* from Mile End Turnpike to Tyburn Bar. With so many warm Friends it is impossible in the present state of human Nature, that I should not have many unprovoked & unknown Enemies.—You will have heard, that on my entering the Box on Saturday Night I was discovered by the Pit—& that they all turned their faces towards our Box, & gave a treble cheer of Claps. (*Letters* 3: 430-31)

Coleridge here juxtaposes images of himself as a lecturer and as the author of *Remorse*. Both figures are spectators as well as spectacles, being watched and applauded, while both keep their authorial isolation by staying in their respectable "boxes." Indeed, what is most spectacular in them is the privacy they exhibit in public: Coleridge improvising

in front of an audience (the “Saints” or Dissenters, at the Surrey Institution) as if he were not lecturing at all but talking to his friends or thinking in private (“I never once thought of the Lecture”), and Coleridge the author having to be discovered in his private box.

This passage also shows why Coleridge is so keen on blending the role of the author with that of the lecturer. Thanks to the work done by the lectures, the unknown and heterogeneous public can be represented as a community of “warm Friends,” in defiance of those proponents of anonymity, the “malignant Papers.” Inescapably, however, these are friends with faces but without names, for they are known to Coleridge from a more intimate, but similarly theatrical venue, that is, from the lecture theatre. Coleridge’s lectures are thus presented here as bridging the gap between the public and the private spheres, offering a middle-ground which enables him to come forward as an author with (relative) self-assurance. As Lucy Newlyn has demonstrated, authorship posed especially strong challenges for Coleridge. Even if lecturing was not without its own strains and tensions, the literary lecture, perhaps more than any other genre, seems to have offered him a way to successfully negotiate authorship in public. One of the reasons for this was that in the lecture theatre he could stage himself, emphatically, not as an author but as the person he hoped was closest to him: the sympathetic reader.

## The Critic as Reader

Philosophical criticism for Coleridge as for his eighteenth-century British predecessors began with reflection on the reading experience. In a lecture note from 1808, Coleridge mentions the critical error of “Judging of Books by books, instead of referring what we read to our own Experience or making it a motive for Observation—one great use of Books” (*Lectures* 1: 86). In a later note, he contrasts a reliance on “former notions and experience” to the immediate process of reading, suggesting that the true critic should disregard the former and concentrate on the latter: “It is much easier to find fault with a writer merely by reference to former notions & experience than to sit down & read him and to connect the one feeling with the other & to judge of words & phrases in proportion as they convey those feelings together” (*Lectures* 1: 367). Criticism, in other words, should be self-reflexive reading; it should connect feeling to feeling and word to word, judging how those sequences correspond. As such, it might reveal important truths not only about the text being read, but also about the mind reading it.

One avowed aim of Coleridge’s lectures was to cure harmful reading habits—especially the “appetite” for novels—through critical reflection. In a lecture note, he contrasts the right way of reading (fostered by Shakespeare’s plays, above all) to what he calls a “sort of beggarly Day-dreaming,” when “the mind furnishes for itself only laziness and a little mawkish sensibility, while the whole *Stuff* and Furniture of the Doze is supplied *ab extra* by a sort of Spiritual Camera Obscura” (*Lectures* 1:124,

emphasis in the original). In other words, he particularly resents the lack of conscious intellectual exertion in reading; his metaphor of the Camera Obscura might be understood as a parody of Locke's description of the understanding as a dark chamber. This may sound like one of Coleridge's attacks on empiricism, transformed into an attack on novel readers. However, he was not alone in entertaining such worries at the time; the harmful effects of novel reading—especially on susceptible female minds—had been discussed by many associationist critics as well. Richard Payne Knight, for instance, whose *Analytical Inquiry* (1805) was the main target of Coleridge's first lectures in 1808, states that novels promote a "passive and solitary dissipation," "vitiating and enervate" the public taste, and "debase and destroy the intellect" (qtd. in Hemingway 23). As Neil Vickers has pointed out, Thomas Beddoes called attention to the same problem in his medical treatise on nervous disorders, especially with respect to young women (70-71).

While in a general sense Coleridge might be understood as participating in this larger debate, it is worth comparing his attacks on novel reading to those of Joseph Priestley in particular, who dealt with this question in his *Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (1777), delivered at the Warrington Academy, an important Dissenting institution, from 1762 onwards. Priestley was an early hero for Coleridge, but his scientific, religious, and philosophical positions (which all incorporated a Hartleyan associationism in some form) were much criticised by him later on. In the *Course*, similarly to Coleridge, Priestley advocates an active kind of reading, repudiating authors who "have left nothing to the exercise of the active faculties of his readers" (141). "[I]n mere reading of this kind," he writes, "we are little more than passive. Trains of ideas pass before our minds, but no active powers of the soul are exerted" (144). The "trains of ideas" mentioned here correspond to what Coleridge, writing about novels, calls "the moving phantasms of one man's Delirium" which "people the barrenness of a hundred other trains" (*Lectures* 1:124). However, Priestley argues that not only novels, but to some extent all imaginative literature encourages passivity: "Poetry and works of fiction make a high *entertainment*, when they are made nothing more of; but they make a very poor and insipid *employment*" (144, emphasis in the original). Intellectual activity in a strict sense belongs to philosophy and science alone, which Priestley contrasts with "sleeping over history, romances, poetry, and plays" (144). Coleridge, for his part, concurs with his early mentor Priestley on novels, but re-fashions the reading of Shakespeare (and a few other poets) as an activity equal in worth to Priestley's two ideals, the active pursuit of science and philosophy.

In one of his lectures Coleridge distinguishes between two kinds of readers of Shakespeare, "Those who read with feeling and understanding" and "Those who with-out affecting to understand or criticize merely feel and are the recipients of the poet's power" (*Lectures* 1: 351-52). While the activity of those placed in the second category is similar to lazy novel reading (albeit probably not as harmful), the first kind unites passive and active components, combining affective response or "feeling" with understanding. Coleridge here—as, I think, elsewhere—incorporates



the philosophical or “scientific” perspective of critics like Priestley and Lord Kames (on whose work Priestley often relies) into the reading experience itself. That is, while earlier philosophical criticism drew a clear distinction between the reader who feels and the critic who understands (in particular, who understands the reader’s response), Coleridge tends to combine the two: his ideal reader is philosophical, and his ideal critic is sympathetic. For this reason, he needs to distinguish his own readerly ideal not only from passive (novel) readers, but also from those critics who too easily adopt other critics’ opinion and fail to rely on their own reading experience. These critics are “passive” in the wrong sense, while being at the same time not “passive” enough—that is, they do not allow themselves to be acted upon by the text they criticise.

In his lectures, Coleridge fashions a criticism that approximates reading itself, but a reading that is inherently self-reflective and philosophically informed; a reading that appears to spill over effortlessly into “philosophy.” That is to say, his criticism is also a hermeneutic—it is an “art” of reading. He does not present a finished system, although his lectures are full of hints that might lead to one, and his philosophical reflections are often derived from the literary passages he discusses (something that earlier philosophical critics tried to conceal). It is hardly accidental that Coleridge tends to introduce himself to his lecture audiences as a professional reader rather than as a critic, stating in 1808, for instance, that he had “never had any strong ambition of publishing, as or being known as an author”: “I have passed the far greater part of my life and employed almost all the powers which Providence has entrusted to me, in the acquirement of knowledge from Books reading & in conversation” (*Lectures* 1: 125). Importantly, his self-definition as a reader and talker does not mean that he positions himself on the same level as any other “reader” in the lecture-room. If anything, Coleridge was a professional reader, not only because of the institutional backing he relied on (which was not very stable), but because of his professed “employment” in life. His task in the lectures was to exhibit the art of reading for those willing to learn. His 1818 “Prospectus” stresses this point, stating that “any important part of these Lectures could not be derived from books” or rather (Coleridge added with characteristic fussiness), “the same information could not be so surely or conveniently acquired from such books as are of commonest occurrence, or with that quantity of time and attention which can be reasonably expected, or even wisely desired, of men engaged in business and the active duties of the world” (39-40). Robin Valenza has recently shown how Wordsworth was among the first to define poetry as a “fulltime mental engagement” albeit “this labor [could] only be written about in terms of leisure” (150-51). Coleridge’s comments on the lecturer’s tasks point towards a comparable professionalization of “reading”—which, however, is sharply distinguished from more openly commercial modes of criticism.

As this suggests, Coleridge the lecturer not only “thinks for himself” but offers to his audience that he will think for them, too. Although this implies that his listeners were inevitably passive compared to him, we might add that they were also called on to engage in reading and interpretation of various sorts. In spite of the “Prospectus”’s



promises, that is, Coleridge's lectures did not present a compendium of "information" which men of business could simply take home and use at leisure. The model of his lectures was not the book but the performance. This meant that in order to understand his interpretation of Shakespeare, audiences had to make sense of Coleridge's enactment of the process of reading and thinking, which was often far from straightforward. In 1812, he wrote another profile of himself emphasizing that interrelatedness:

O when I think of the inexhaustible Mine of virgin Treasure in our Shakespear, that I have been <almost> daily reading him since I was ten years old—that in the 30 intervening years have been not fruitlessly & intermittingly employed in the study of the Greek, Latin, <English,> Italian, Spanish & German Pœts Bellettrists, & for the last 15 years even far more intensely to the analysis of the Laws of ~~rational~~ Life & Reason as they exist in man . . . and know that at every new accession of knowledge, after every Successful exercise of meditation, every fresh presentation of experience, I have unfailingly discovered a proportional increase of wisdom & intuition in Shakespear. (*Lectures* 1: 430)

Here Coleridge is presented as a reader with a vengeance. Taking up Clifford Siskin's suggestion that Wordsworth's *Prelude* might be understood as a résumé in question form ("Was it for this . . .?")—that is, a written work reviewing "what had qualified him for such employment" (112)—this note might be read as Coleridge's draft of his professional *CV*, in the form of an adverbial meditation. It emphasizes his qualifications as a reader, who has an intimate knowledge not only of "our" poet but of Classical and European literature as well. Moreover, as a philosophical analyst of the laws of "Life and Reason," he is also supremely qualified to "think for himself." His philosophy informs his reading and his reading feeds into his philosophy. These qualifications might well sound extraordinary, but the task he devises for himself requires nothing short of that: he endeavours to measure the depths of poetry (or at least those of Shakespeare) in continuous interplay with his own mind. Coleridge, in other words, claims to explicate Shakespeare through the perspective of his own changing, growing intellectual life, or even, *as* his own intellectual life. In this sense, the lectures are also public rehearsals for *Biographia Literaria*.

## The Lecturer's Body

A criticism that invested so much in the immediacy of the reading experience and in spontaneous thought had to be performed, and not delivered as a set of propositions. What the editor William Jerdan wrote of Coleridge's "little stories" must be relevant to his lectures as well: "no idea can be formed" of them, "divorced from the accessories of person, emphasis, and playful action" (qtd. in Pite 346). The unforeseeable turns of Coleridge's discourse—which prevented a famous shorthand-writer from writing it down, since "the conclusion of every one of Coleridge's sentences was a *surprise*

upon him” (*Lectures* 1: lxxxiii)—promised his listeners an unexpected insight into Shakespeare’s genius or into the laws of the mind in any moment of the lectures. Meanwhile, such turns allowed glimpses into a mind that was meant to mediate between them, that is, into the mind of Coleridge himself. Records of the lectures suggest that the complex personality he “performed” through various verbal and non-verbal means was felt to be centre-stage by many of his listeners. In 1812, for instance, *The Rifleman* reported that during one lecture “Shakespeare himself disappeared in the ocean of human nature. But all these things are rather a proof of Mr. Coleridge’s powers of mind than any thing else” (Perry, *Interviews* 153). The poet and dramatist Edward Jerningham was more critical, stating that Coleridge “too often Interwove Himself into the Texture of his lecture” (Perry, *Interviews* 121). In other words, Coleridge as a lecturer was liable to the very charge he himself brought up against star-actors: his presence sometimes overshadowed the Shakespearean text he was meant to interpret.

Inevitably, his words and expressive gestures were perceived as signifiers for an essence beyond them. A recurrent theme in accounts of his lectures is that his speech somehow could not be written down (Perry, “The Talker” 105-07). But failure to do so generally strengthened the wish for a written version. A remark in a newspaper report is symptomatic: “Many of his positions, though striking, and probably just, were of so novel a cast that they were rather more fit for contemplation in the closet, than to afford matter for a report on a cursory hearing in a public assembly” (*Lectures* 1: 431). This suggests that Coleridge’s thought, like Shakespeare’s work, is best contemplated in book form—in the private space of the closet (as opposed to the newspaper report and the lecture-room) that would allow patient reflection on its “striking” originality. But, paradoxically, it was Coleridge’s reliance on newspaper publicity and on devices known from the theatre and from public oratory that generated such a strong wish for a “closet” version of his speech—that is, for a critical volume on Shakespeare he never published. His consistent use of the rhetoric of feeling throughout his lectures (including its rather theatrical body language) seems to confirm Rex Veedler’s larger point that Coleridge “not only demonstrates a substantial understanding of the history of rhetoric but also includes well-known principles of rhetoric in his method” (300).

George Campbell in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) accorded a crucial role to affect in public speaking: “If it is fancy which bestows brilliancy on our ideas, if it is memory which gives them stability, passion doth more, it animates them. Hence they derive spirit and energy” (1:199). He states, in particular, that if one’s aim is persuasion, the “affecting lineaments” of pathetic discourse must be “interwoven with our argument,” which results in a quality he calls the “vehement” or “impassioned” (1:36). If an orator knows how to command the passions through verbal means, his discourse becomes irresistible:

Thus we have seen in what manner passion to an absent object may be excited by eloquence, which, by enlivening and invigorating the ideas of imagination,

makes them resemble the impressions of sense and the traces of memory; and in this respect hath an effect on the mind similar to that produced by a telescope on the sight: things remote are brought near, things obscure rendered conspicuous. We have seen also in what manner a passion already excited may be calmed; how by the oratorical magic, as by inverting the telescope, the object may be again removed and diminished. (1: 237-38)

Campbell's metaphor of the telescope points towards the "scientific" grounding he sought to give to the art of rhetoric. His reference to "magic," however, acknowledges his awareness of a more risky aspect of its manipulative power. James Mulvihill in his study of romantic rhetoric shows that Coleridge was deeply suspicious of the new rhetorical appeal to the passions, seeing in it "a real possibility of regression to conditioned response" (29). This is particularly noticeable in his reactions to political oratory (a genre inseparably linked to the French Revolution). But, as I would argue, Coleridge's own early successes as a preacher and orator, and later as a literary lecturer, depended to a large extent on his skill at manipulating Campbell's "telescope."

As a sympathetic critic, Coleridge is eager to engage his listeners' passions on behalf of Shakespeare through various explicit and implicit means. This, as he himself suggests, contributes to the overall effect: that of making Shakespeare "present" in the lecture-room. Sometimes he even uses optical metaphors comparable to Campbell's. According to Charles Tomalin's report, for instance, he once stated that "tho' too much love for an author was like a mist which magnified unduly, it brought forward objects that would otherwise have passed unnoticed" (*Lectures* 1: 268). Coleridge here claims to devise a mode of reading that relies on the magnifying power of affection, rather than on what he saw as the belittling perspective of modern criticism (his choice of "mist" as main metaphor, of course, suggests the "naturalness" of this otherwise perhaps slightly disconcerting phenomenon). This is related to his philosophical views on love and its role in understanding and aesthetic appreciation (see Miall). But it also serves the purpose of rhetorical persuasion. He tends to rely on the rhetoric of feeling especially in *encomia*, when he speaks of Shakespeare in near-religious terms: "That such a mind evolved itself in the narrow bounds of a human form is a Problem indeed—Powers tenfold greater than mine would be incommensurate to its Solution, which in its nearest and most adventurous Approach must still leave a wide chasm which our Love and Admiration alone can fill up" (*Lectures* 2: 114). Sometimes Coleridge displays an opposite tendency as well, a tendency to "humanise" Shakespeare by bringing him nearer to his audience. This can happen through rhetorical metastasis—i.e. through refuting charges made by imaginary adversaries. *The Bristol Gazette* reports one such instance:

If a man speak injuriously of a friend, our vindication of him is naturally warm; Shakespear had been accused of profaneness, he (Mr. C.) from the perusal of him, had acquired a habit of looking into his own heart, and perceived the goings

on of his nature, and confident he was, Shakespear was a writer of all others the most calculated to make his readers better as well as wiser. (*Lectures* 1: 522)

Coleridge here appears to “defend” Shakespeare in the same way as he would take responsibility for a friend. He claims to know him from experience: in fact, he knows him as he knows himself, for he had studied his works in conjunction with the “goings on of his [own?] nature” and each half of this knowledge validates the other. “His own heart” is offered as evidence for Shakespeare’s power to make readers “better as well as wiser.”

As this suggests, Coleridge first had to engage audiences on his own behalf if he was to move their passions in Shakespeare’s favour. In classical terms, a discourse had to be validated by the moral and intellectual “character” of the orator; in terms of the new rhetoric, this meant that the speaker had to convince his listeners of his sincerity. Accounts of his first series at the Royal Institution (where he was required to read out a written manuscript) suggest that he was not at first successful. “There was but little animation,” J. C. Hall remembered of one lecture, “his theme did not seem to stir him into life; the ordinary repose of his countenance was rarely broken up; he used little or no action; and his voice, though mellifluous, was monotonous. He lacked, indeed, the earnestness without which no man is truly eloquent” (Perry, *Interviews* 123). This suggests (if Hall’s memory is correct) that Coleridge needed to learn how to use the devices of oratory in the lecture theatre; he had to use “action” and facial expression, or any other rhetorical device that conveyed “earnestness.” The best method of all was to speak extempore. From Robert Lowth to Hugh Blair, a number of eighteenth-century rhetoricians recommended this (or at least the appearance of it), most of all to preachers (see Harshbarger and Stafford). For these writers, extempore speech stood for true enthusiasm or inspiration; moreover, it afforded ample opportunities to express feelings, and this was the surest way of engaging hearers’ passions. Joseph Priestley states that whatever has “the appearance of *present thought*, and *extempore* unprepared address, contributes not a little to make a person seem to be in earnest. He then seems to speak from his *real feelings*, without having recourse to artificial helps” (111). His chief example is St. Paul, whose epistles approximate live speech:

they have not the least appearance of *design* in them, they show that he wrote from his heart, and dictated his real thoughts and sentiments at the time of their composition. They likewise throw considerable light upon the *natural temper* of that great apostle. We see that he was a warm man, of a quick apprehension, of great ardour and vehemence in whatever he engaged in, and that he was inclined to be hasty. (111)

He also mentions the early Christians, the first Protestants, the Methodists and the Quakers as examples of the power of extemporaneous speech. Apart from the

sincerity conveyed by this mode of speaking, it also evokes “a continued *wonder*” in the audience, which naturally works towards persuasion (112).

Jane Stabler has called attention to Coleridge’s indebtedness to Priestley’s rhetorical theory, arguing that the “elements of “fancy” and playfulness in Coleridge’s speculation are related to Priestley’s advocacy of extempore speech and possible contradiction as valuable intellectual stimuli” (181). If Coleridge knew that improvisation was commendable in science, as a Unitarian preacher he must have been aware of its uses in pulpit oratory as well. It is arguable that even in writing—namely in the *Biographia*—he relied on the effects of spontaneity and “presence” that Priestley identified in St. Paul. But in the lectures extempore speech was Coleridge’s hallmark, which distinguished him from most other popular lecturers of the day. It is important to note that this does not mean that he always spoke without the aid of notes or preparation. James Gillman’s account of an 1818 performance is revealing: “He lectured from notes, which he had carefully made; yet it was obvious, that his audience was more delighted when, putting his notes aside, he spoke extempore. . . . In his lectures he was brilliant, fluent, and rapid; his words seemed to flow as from a person repeating with grace and energy some delightful poem” (qtd. in Armour and Howes 420). This suggests that the notes provided a firm basis for Coleridge’s lecture, but they acquired their full significance only when they were brushed aside—an almost ritualistic gesture often recorded by his listeners. At that point, writing gave way to “poetry,” reflection to inspiration.

Coleridge, of course, was fully aware of the importance of that gesture; in 1818 he wrote confidently to Henry Crabb Robinson: “I shall have *written* every Lecture, just as if I h[ad intend]ed to [read the]m; but shall deliver them without book—which plan will, I trust, answer all purposes—that of order in the matter, and of animation in the manner” (*Letters* 4: 812). Sometimes he called attention to his own mode of delivery in the lecture-room as well. In December 1811, for instance, the young John Payne Collier transcribed Coleridge’s public confession according to which

when he delivered his Lectures at the Royal Institution he had prepared his first Lecture and received for it a cold suffrage of approbation: from accidental causes he was unable to ~~prep~~ study his second lecture and obtained universal and heartfelt applause. With the same spirit he hoped the lectures he was about to deliver would be received. It was true his ~~ideas~~ thoughts would not be so accurately arranged but his audience should have the whole Skeleton tho’ the bones were not ~~correctly~~ put together with the nicest anatomical skill. (*Lectures* 1: 286-87)

Just as Priestley had said, extempore speech guarantees that thoughts are met with “universal and heartfelt applause.” His very inaccuracies, Coleridge suggests, are to be counted in his favour. As Jane Stabler has shown, Priestley had also recommended retracting one’s own arguments, staging debates with oneself and formulating

propositions in different versions, in order to involve audiences in the process of thinking. It might be said that Coleridge was over-zealously following this advice when, for instance, he offered so many subsequent versions of his definition of poetry in his 1811-12 lecture course that audiences were at a loss to determine whether any one of them was meant to be definitive.

While he might have had to convince his listeners to accept such apparent faults as his virtues, there was an aspect of improvisation to which he could not call attention, at least in theory: the expressive language of gesture and voice. In eighteenth-century new rhetoric and elocutionary theory these provided the key to effective speaking; however, while several hints were given as to the right use of rhetorical “action,” the consensus was that these features could not be feigned. As Priestley writes,

The external expressions of passion, with all their variations, corresponding to the different degrees of their emotions, are too complex for any person in the circumstances of a public speaker to be able to attend to them. Or, were it possible, the difference between a *genuine automatic* and a *voluntary* motion, is sufficiently apparent. All motions that are automatic have a quickness and vigour which are lost when they become voluntary. (115)

Coleridge could not call attention to his own inspired gestures, because they were supposedly beyond his conscious will. But reminiscences suggest that audiences did not need to be reminded of that—they were sufficiently aware of the cultural significance of body language to interpret Coleridge’s performance. Unable to record his inspired discourse, they tried to record the *bodily* signs of inspiration. They listened for the sound of Coleridge’s speech; they looked for the outward traces of absorption. John Payne Collier, with his near-idolatry of the lecturer, provides a fine, detailed, example:

I always thought his mouth beautiful: the lips were full, and a little drawn down at the corners, and when he was speaking the attention (at least my attention) was quite as much directed to his mouth as to his eyes, the expression of it was so eloquent. In the energy of talking, ‘the rose-leaves’ were at times ‘a little bedewed,’ but his words seemed to flow the easier for the additional lubricity. I did not especially admire Coleridge’s ‘large grey eyes,’ for, now and then, they assumed a dead, dull look, almost as if he were not seeing out of them; and I doubt if external objects made much impression upon his sight, when he was animated in discourse. (qtd. in Perry, *Interviews* 144)

In this passage, the whole iconography of “Coleridge the Lecturer” can be identified. Focusing on the (sensual) mouth, Collier emphasizes inspired and seductive speech. The “blindness” of the eyes, however disconcerting, is a figure for the “inner light,” which at the same time blinds him to the external world. Concentrating on

the ideal “inner world” of Coleridge’s lectures can easily make one blind to such emphatically bodily aspects. But the effectiveness of the lecture scene depended on the interplay of the two, just as in the case of reciting a poem, “in which the enkindling Reciter, by perpetual comment of looks and tones, lends his own will and apprehensive faculty to his Auditors” (*Biographia* 2: 239-40).

While Collier offers a more or less static portrait of the lecturer, a description by Joseph Farrington shows how masterfully Coleridge staged his own “drama” of thought:

When Coleridge came into the Box there were several Books laying. He opened two or three of them silently and shut them again after a short inspection. He then paused and leaned His head on His hand, and at last said, He had been thinking for a word to express the distinct character of Milton as a Poet, but not finding one that wd. express it, He should make one ‘*Ideality*’. He spoke extempore. (qtd. in Perry, *Interviews* 122)

Coleridge’s distracted, Hamlet-like meditation, together with the immediacy of his address, form an eloquent interpretation of the theme of his lecture on Milton. The “stage business” stresses the private and reflexive nature of Coleridge’s inspiration—he generally seems to have preferred devices that contradicted the appearance of oratory. His tone was conversational and meditative, which made audiences feel that they had been admitted to his private circle of friends. His flights of enthusiasm were checked by reflection (see Russell 124). A remark made to Mrs. Morgan after one of his improvised lectures is telling: it was “quite in my fire-side way, & pleased more than any” (*Letters* 3: 457). This kind of quasi-domestic “fire-side” lecture might well have been Coleridge’s own invention; however, it conforms to a general movement in modern rhetoric towards effects of intimacy, as opposed to “ranting” oratory. John Walker in his *Elements of Elocution*, for instance, writes that it is more important to learn how to lower the voice than how to raise it, adding that “Nothing will so powerfully work on the voice, as supposing ourselves conversing at different intervals with different parts of the auditory” (2: 234). He also recommends the theatrical practice of the “aside,” for it gives “the idea of [actors] speaking to themselves in such a manner as not to be heard by the person with them on the stage, and yet must necessarily be heard by the whole theatre” (2: 248-49).

Asides, together with their extended version, the digression, are not simply characteristic of Coleridge’s lectures; they are as good as their organizing principle. Accompanied by other devices, such as the abrupt break and the weighty silence, they constitute the verbal equivalents of expressive body language.<sup>7</sup> Priestley also recommends speakers to make “*parentheses* in sentences, and to *digress* from the principal subject or argument, and return to it again” (111)—advice that Coleridge followed assiduously. There is a specific kind of Coleridgean digression, however, which is not aimed at providing intellectual stimulation, but is directly identified as a



symptom of feeling. This kind is rarely remarked upon by modern interpreters, but, I would argue, is essential to the effectiveness of Coleridge's lectures. One example is when, in 1808, he is talking about his friend Humphrey Davy's illness (who was the most celebrated lecturer—albeit in chemistry—at the Royal Institution): “I have been seduced into a Digression—a digression indeed of the Head only; for with me while I stand here, it must needs be in the strait road of the Heart” (*Lectures* 1: 64). Similar passages can be found everywhere in the lecture notes and even in reports like the following: “He trusted that what he had thus said in the ardour of his feelings would not be entirely lost, but would awaken in his audience those sympathies without which it was vain to proceed in his criticism of Shakespeare” (*Lectures* 1: 278). Digressions like these are important, I think, because they are meant to manifest the surplus of emotion and to generate the “sympathy” which sustains Coleridge's philosophical analysis of Shakespeare. His proneness to be “seduced” into digression, in other words, clearly indicates that his criticism is not a mere “anatomy,” like that of some earlier philosophical critics, but one that is grounded in, and perpetually generates, trans-individual feeling.

## Sentimental Education: Conclusion

Coleridge wrote the prototype of all such digressions in a lecture note for his earliest 1808 course, which displays an element of conscious theatricality:

As the main Object, for which I have undertaken these Lectures, is to enforce at various times & by various arguments & instances the close and reciprocal connections of Just Taste with pure Morality, I cannot permit myself to consider this as a Digression; especially, as without that acquaintance with the heart of man, or that docility & childlike gladness to be acquainted with it, which those only can have, who dare look at their own <hearts,> <that (N.b. in a *low quiet voice*)> with a steadiness which Religion only has the power of reconciling with sincere Humility—I am deeply convinced, that no man, however wide his Erudition, however patient his antiquarian researches, can possibly understand, or be worthy of understanding, the writings of Shakespeare— . . . (*Lectures* 1: 78)

The staged intimacy of this passage (part of it to be spoken, Coleridge reminds himself, “in a *low quiet voice*”), leaves no doubt about the public function of his criticism. The lectures were meant to educate his audiences' feelings, as much as their intellect—their ambiguous theatricality, with all the necessary rhetorical underpinnings, is subservient to that purpose. In this paper I have attempted to show how Coleridge's lectures might be made sense of in the context of the new rhetoric and its emphasis on affect, a significant aspect of which dealt with the bodily signs of feeling. In his lectures, Coleridge displays a degree of virtuosity in manipulating such devices, and

his audiences' response shows that they too were often eager to participate in the circuit of sympathy which formed the groundwork of the performances. I also argued that "feeling" was one of the two key components that defined Coleridge's attitude as a critic: grounded in insights of earlier British critics like Joseph Priestley, but also subtly modifying their view, Coleridge re-fashions criticism as self-reflexive reading, in which "feeling" (affective response) is combined with "understanding" (philosophical analysis). Coleridge's performance of feeling, therefore, is far from being some kind of accessory to the "matter" of his lectures, but is an essential part of it. This is hardly surprising if we consider the lectures not (only) as a set of critical propositions about Shakespeare, but (also) as public performances shaped by nineteenth-century audiences' expectations. In various ways, Coleridge's critical positions were crystallised through sustained negotiations with his heterogeneous groups of listeners. In conclusion, I would like to suggest something about his own justification for developing this particular form of "theatrical" criticism.

In eighteenth-century moral philosophy, the theatre had been an important metaphor for moral education, something that is also traceable in romantic drama. For Coleridge, the state of the theatres was an index of the nation's moral health (Carlson 33). He explains this in detail in a long note written for the opening lecture of one of his 1812 series, discussing the decline of tragedy and the theatre, listing "forms of disease most preclusive of tragic worth" (*Lectures* 1: 427). These boil down to what he calls the "dead Palsy of the public mind" (1: 429)—a diagnosis resembling what Wordsworth says in his 1800 "Preface" about the "almost savage torpor" to which the modern mind is reduced (Wordsworth and Coleridge 249). However, while Wordsworth only mentions the theatre in passing, Coleridge in this note contemplates it not only as a site of the "epidemic," but also as a possible remedy.

As we have seen, Coleridge found many faults with early-nineteenth-century theatre, especially when it came to productions of Shakespeare's plays. However, his note also calls attention to a beneficial change that affected theatrical representation, which delights "the Philanthropist & Philosopher" and disappoints only "Poets, Painters, Statuaryies," namely, "the security, comparative equability, and ever-increasing sameness of human Life" (*Lectures* 1: 428). As a result of growing security and routine, people's capacity for experiencing strong passions has diminished, which also means that their ability to appreciate tragedy is gradually lost. However, Coleridge suggests that theatre might still be able to counter this development and arouse a slumbering understanding of tragic passion in the people. Towards the end of his note, he raises the possibility, or rather, indulges in a fantasy, of what would happen if Shakespeare's knowledge of human nature could be made accessible to people through more adequate theatrical performances:

by a conceivable too & possible tho' hardly to be expected, arrangement of the British Theatres to so large—not all indeed—but so large a proportion of this indefinite *All* (which no Comprehension has yet drawn the line of

circumscription so as to say to itself, I have seen *the whole*.) might be sent into the very Heads & Hearts, into the very souls, of the Mass of Mankind to whom except by this living Comment & Interpretation it must remain for ever a sealed up Book Volume, a deep Well without a Wheel or windlace—I may be pardoned if it seems to me a pardonable enthusiasm to steal away from sober probability Likelihood to share and even in a dream of honest Enthusiasm at such so share so rich a feast in the faery-world of Possibility! (*Lectures* 1: 430)

Theatre's "living Comment & Interpretation," its very bodily and sensuous nature, might make it possible to bring home Shakespeare's spiritual wisdom to the "souls" of the "Mass of Mankind." The implication is, of course, that the "Mass of Mankind" are dependent on their senses, and theatre could mitigate this dependence paradoxically through its own reliance on the sensory. This is hardly the straightforwardly anti-theatrical position with which Coleridge is sometimes credited, but it still establishes the empirical as a lower, though necessary, order, to which the theatre of the mind is superior. Moreover, Coleridge's fantasy about staging Shakespeare for the people is admittedly no more than just a fantasy, while he continues to assert that the unfathomable "*whole*" of Shakespeare could not be presented in any theatre.

Even if theatrical production is ultimately discredited, one possibility still remains: the possibility of lecturing. I think it is hardly accidental that Coleridge wrote this note as a preamble for an opening lecture to one of his courses, for it implies a justification for the very genre in which he was engaged. The lecturer, who has presented himself as something like a professional reader of Shakespeare, takes over the actor's task of providing "living Comment & Interpretation" in both the literal *and* figurative sense, and thereby conveys Shakespeare's knowledge to the "Heads and Hearts" of all his listeners. The lecturer, like the actor, is an embodied medium between the Shakespearean idea and the empirical world of the audiences. So, while Shakespeare's plays certainly travelled from stage to page in the Romantic period, Coleridge's lectures demonstrate that there was also some significant traffic in the other direction: they travelled from page to "stage" as well, where the latter is to be taken in a qualified sense, meaning the more exclusive venue of the lecture theatre. Early-nineteenth-century public institutions with their more select audiences could be re-fashioned by Coleridge as offering a middle ground between the privacy of the closet and the public pleasures of the theatre. Coleridge's characteristic "fire-side" delivery enabled his audiences to enjoy something of both.

One definite advantage that the Romantic lecture shared with theatrical productions was the unlimited number of subsequent "runs" that could be offered to the public. Coleridge went on lecturing on Shakespeare and literature for more than a decade, with each performance—slightly or substantially—different from the others. The desultory, rambling nature of the lectures almost flaunted his inability to cover "*All*" of Shakespeare, while he never stopped suggesting Shakespeare's unreachable

totality. Among other things, modern criticism might be thankful to Coleridge for the magic formula: the lecturer's task is impossible, and therefore interminable.

## Notes

- 1 The writing of this article was funded by the EEA and Norway Grants, through the Magyary Zoltán Postdoctoral Fellowship.
- 2 Compare with Galperin 1993, esp. pp. 156-204 ("Coleridge's Antitheatricality: The Quest for Community").
- 3 For a detailed discussion of this romantic attitude, see Younglim Han.
- 4 Hume in "Of Essay Writing" advocates polite conversation (dominated by the "fair sex") because "'men of letters' need to be engaged with society, and polite culture needs to be provided with serious materials for discussion." This stance might be comparable to Coleridge's 1818 "Prospectus." On conversation see also Warren 1990, and Frasca-Spada 1999.
- 5 Compare with Richard Holmes: "Coleridge only slowly realized he needed to be much more innovative and intimate—to be much more himself. . . . He needed in effect to create a new style of lecturing, dramatic and largely extempore, which took risks, changed moods, digressed and doubled back, and played with his own eccentricities. He needed, above all, to enact the imaginative process of the poet in his own person, to demonstrate a poet at work in the laboratory of his ideas" (118).
- 6 Gillian Russell argues that Byron portrays Coleridge as lecturer in his poem "The Blues" (134-38); other portrayals include those by De Quincey and Henry Crabb Robinson. Henry James's "The Coxon Fund" offers a later fictionalized portrait.
- 7 Compare with Lucy Newlyn: "Just as the body was an expressive signifier of feelings—a 'supplement' to the speaking voice—so it was in the gaps and fissures of spoken discourse that genuine eloquence was to be found. This is why extempore utterance was thought to be more appropriate to the communication of powerful feeling than finished prose; and why there was a long-established association in the eighteenth century between extemporality, eloquence, and enthusiasm" (348). Newlyn opposes the valorization of body language by Priestley and Hazlitt to Coleridge's preference for musicality; however, I think the opposition is not as categorical as she asserts.

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